

Screw This, I'm Firing the Halo Array

by Galaxy Hunter

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Summary: It's the end of Mass Effect 3, and it sucks. Luckily Commander Shepard won't take it lying down. A collection of random alternate endings to ME3. This story is complete and utter crack. Rated M for language and adult situations. Shepard M and Liara.

1. Chapter 1

Otherwise known as Mass Effect 3 Ending Rage, the Fanfiction. I really don't know why I published this. I know why I wrote it, that's easy: this was pretty much, word-for-word, my reaction to the ending of Mass Effect 3. Bioware, you made two great games, the lead-up in ME3 was great and then, ARRGGHHH! You did this to your fans! Well, this is what I think of ME3's ending, suck on it! /Rage

Readers, please don't be offended by my idiocy, this is a crack fic. And Spoiler Alert below, FYI.

Mass Effect and Halo aren't mine, Mass Effect belongs to Bioware, and I'm not sure who owns the rights to the Halo franchise, but I know it ain't me. Please don't sue me.

* * *

><p>"What the fuck are you saying?"<p>

I stare at the glowing hologram of the young boy in front of me.

He smiles sadistically. "I'm saying that because Bioware is a piece of fucking shit and wants to go with a dark and depressing ending where you die, you'll have to sacrifice yourself to save the galaxy and kill the Reapers."

"No."

"What?"

"I said no." My face contorts with fury and my voice starts shaking. "Fuck you, fuck Bioware, and fuck this whole fucking game! I'm taking the motherfucking third option!"

The hologram looks confused.

"What third option?"

In response I hold up my wrist. A blue, glowing hologram of a woman in a skin-tight jumpsuit appears, projected from my gauntlet.

"Cortana, is it ready?"

"Yes, John." She smiles at me. "I'm using the Activation Index right now."

"Good."

"What is going on?" The hologram demands of me, losing patience. Cortana's hologram winks out of existence as I turn to face the construct.

"You don't get it do you? One game only has a confirmed first name; the other only has a confirmed last name. Ugh, how can people be so stupid? I'll spell it out for you, and I'll use small words you poorly-constructed plot device." I spring to attention and snap off a salute. "Master Chief Petty Officer John Shepard, Sierra-117, at your service."

For once, I witness a dumbstruck AI. "Wha-wha- how does that even work? You can't be a SPARTAN, that's impossible!"

I grin. "Impossible is what I do best."

"Wait a second." The hologram looks horrified. "You're firing the Halo Array!" I nod. "The same one the Forerunners built?" Another nod. "The one that was designed to wipe out all life in the galaxy?"

"Ding-ding-ding! We have a winner, ladies and gentlemen!" I say sardonically.

"But-but- You'll kill everyone!" The hologram objects.

"Errt, sorry you lose. Buh-buy, loooossssserrr!" I say. It's quite fun taking out your frustration on this damn thing. "The only reason it wiped out the Forerunners is they were rushed and improperly calibrated the damn thing. They didn't trust AI's after Mendicant Bias went rouge and stopped using them. It's a shame, Cortana managed to re-adjust the target parameters in about three hours."

"Longest hours of my damn existence, Chief!" Cortana's voice blares from my external speakers. "Would you believe that those morons wiped themselves out because they forgot to carry a goddamned four? Ugh!"

"Oh relax," I try to soothe her. "I'll get EDI to give you a backrub, or something, later."

"You'd better." She grumbles. "Oh, and by the way the array will fire in one minute, just a heads-up."

The hologram merely gapes at me. "You-you-you... He stutters. You can't do this! This is a complete ass-pull! It isn't deep! It isn't dark! It isn't dramatic!"

"Fuck dark and dramatic." I growl, I'm getting really fucking pissed off at this shit. "You know what else is dark and dramatic? Real life. I fucking hate the shitiness and drama that comes with real life. Fuck that, that's why I play video games, to get away from all of it. I want a video game that has a nice, uplifting ending, where the hero wins. I said it before and I'll say it again. FUCK YOU! FUCK DRAMA! AND FUCK THE MOTHERFUCKING DARK ENDING TROPE!"

As I roar these last few words, a wave of blue-white energy flares throughout space, appearing so fast no one can tell where it came from, only that there is a flash of light, blinding in its intensity. All around the debris-strewn space surrounding the Citadel the Reaper dreadnoughts and destroyers suddenly stop, the lights on their hulls flickering, any fighters or missiles they launched veer off-course and sputter out. Then, one by one, the Reapers shriek, an unholy sound that seems to simultaneously grate on one's ears, and yet it is the sweetest music ever heard. Then, with a flash of light, each one explodes in a small fireball, like a miniature star.

This scene repeats itself all around the galaxy, waves of light flash through every corner of the galaxy, wiping out the Reaper forces. The beleaguered defenders blink in disbelief as they watch the invincible warships detonate, and then they let out a massive cheer. Shepard has done it! The Reapers have been vanquished!

I nod in satisfaction and turn back to the hologram that is seething with rage. "How-how could you! You broke the cycle! Synthetics will overrun the galaxy! There won't be any order! I will have order!"

"Shut up!" I bellow. "I am so sick of your bullshit! Look at the galaxy, the Geth didn't rise up against organics, organics attacked them first! Cortana didn't go genocidal, and neither did EDI! Hell! The only reason AIs go evil is because people assume that they will and automatically persecute them! They aren't inherently evil, where the fuck did you get that idea from, a bad 1980's Sci-fi film! And what the fuck man? 'I will have order', what the fuck is that supposed to mean?" I snap my fingers as something in my mind clicks. "Oh, I get it, I get it. Somebody here is a virgin!"

The hologram stares and mouths, at a complete loss for words. I laugh my fucking ass off.

"Hahahahaha, no wonder you're so cranky, you never got any!" I try to control myself, but every time I see its thunderstruck face, I burst into fresh peals of laughter. Finally, with stitches in my sides and tears in my eyes I manage to get myself under control. "Ah, kid, thanks for the laughs, but I gotta go. I'm a big goddamned hero now, and I wouldn't want to be late for my victory party! And after that, I think I'll go bang my smokin'-hot, blue-skinned, space-babe of a girlfriend."

I turn and walk out of the room, leaving the hologram standing there,

sputtering in impotent (heh) rage.

What follows is the single largest party the galaxy has ever seen. Once survivors and life-boats from the various ground and space battles are saved, the music and alcohol appears almost out of nowhere, as every species in the galaxy puts aside what few issues they have left with each other, and get riotously, uproariously drunk. The music blaring from every world could almost be heard in the vacuum of space, it was so loud. On every planet, Turians, Humans, Quarians, Asari, Salarrians, Drell, and every species in between got absolutely shit-faced drunk.

"WOOOOO-HOOOOO!" I shout, swinging from the chandelier in a five-star hotel on the Citadel. "YEEAAHH! Everyone drink 'till you can't feel things!" I lose my grip and fall, landing flat on my ass on a dining table, which breaks under the strain, no one seems to mind, they're too busy partying like they'd never get another chance. Garrus walks up to me, unsteadily.

"Here he *hic* is." He says with a slurred voice. "Commander Shepard, savior of the Normandy and Captain of the Galaxy, or something like that. He puts his arms around the two women standing next to him. "I was just telling these lovely ladies how great it was to serve with you on the Normandy."

I manage to stand, unsteadily, and glance at the women with him, one is an Asari that I don't recognize, and the other is a human woman with short, red hair. "Garrus!" I say, lurching forward and hugging him. "I never could have done it without you." I'm really hammered at this point and I don't really care about anything. "I love you man, I really do."

"Shepard," a female voice calls out from behind me. I feel a pair of small, cool hands place themselves on my back. "I think you've had quite enough."

I turn; releasing Garrus from the awkward hug, and see Liara standing there. She's wearing a tiny black dress that's tight enough to accentuate her curves in all the right places.

"I don't think I've had quite enough yet!" I declare, and I grab her by the hand, tugging her through the crowd, to her embarrassed amusement. "So long folks!" I shout, walking through the door to the hotel ballroom. "And remember, if you see the Normandy a-rockin', don't come a-knockin'!"

I sweep Liara off her feet and carry her to my ship.

* * *

><p>The galaxy-wide party lasted for a whopping three weeks before the last pockets of revelry finally burned themselves out. Based on eyewitness accounts, Commander Shepard and Liara entered the Normandy, and weren't seen again for a month afterwards. Following the party came the daunting task of cleaning up the galaxy, and repairing the damage done by the Reapers. This was placed on top of the fact that nine months after the conclusion of the party the birthrate of practically every species in the galaxy exploded. However, the galactic leaders managed to pool their resources, and several years later one could hardly tell that there had been a

galaxy-wide war at all.<p>

Commander Shepard returned to Earth with Liara after the party, where the Alliance gave him practically every medal they could think of. Eventually he was promoted to Admiral, and was assigned with his newly-wed wife to protect and study the Halo rings. John and Liara Shepard had seven children, all of whom eventually entered military or civil service.

The galactic government abandoned the Citadel as the capital of the Galactic Council, and instead moved to one of the secured Halo installations, after it had been cleansed of the remaining Flood. The Sangheili, Unggoy, Kig-Yar, Yanme'e, Mgalekgolo, and Huragok, who had all cut themselves off from the rest of the galaxy after the Great Schism, came out of their self-imposed isolation. The Reapers had ignored them because they returned to their homeworlds and destroyed all of the spacefaring technology the San'Shyuum had given them, preferring to find their own paths instead of using the Covenant's leftover technology. It was discovered that the San'Shyuum and Jiralhanae had managed to wipe themselves out after being forcibly confined to their homeworlds. The former Covenant species shared their advances in technology in return for seats on the Council of Species, the new ruling body in the Galaxy.

The Mass Relays and element-zero core star drives were gradually phased out of use, as the Sangheili had perfected a form of the Shaw-Fujikawa Slip-space drive that was faster than Eezo FTL. They discontinued use of the Mass Relays and deactivated them, believing that they were too dangerous to continue being used. The portal in Africa was excavated again, and a scout team sent through to the Ark. It was discovered that the Ark hadn't taken much damage when the replacement Halo fired. It merely damaged a portion of it. The galactic forces stationed troops there, and eventually found a few Reapers lurking in Dark Space that were apparently supposed to act as a second wave. The combined forces, under the command of Admiral Shepard, slaughtered them in their sleep. Several of the commanders are reported to have laughed maniacally while they gave the orders to fire.

Admiral Shepard lived a very long and happy life until he fell victim to old age. He passed away at three hundred and seven years old, surrounded by his family, friends, and former squad-mates. After giving his love to his family and bidding farewell to his teammates, he uttered one last sentence, which proved baffling to all who were with him.

"I win, Bioware, I fucking win."

2. Chapter 2

Well, in response to the all of the positive response this story has received, I've decided to add a second chapter, another what-if scenario. I've also got a tentative plan for a third chapter too, if this one goes over well that is. Note: this is still a crack fic, and nothing in here aside from my idea belongs to me. Another thing: this chapter isn't based on Mass Effect and Halo, it's based on Mass Effect and the Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy. Bwahahahahaha! And on that note let's begin:

* * *

><p>That was how it could have happened, but how about this?<p>

* * *

><p>Commander Shepard stood and gazed at the silent star-child, who patiently awaited his choice. He turned and stared at the strange device emitting the huge beam of energy.<p>

He'd been given three choices: sacrifice his body to upload his consciousness to the Crucible and gain control of the Reapers, throw himself into the heart of the device to cause every organic and inorganic being in the galaxy to merge, creating synthesis, or critically damage the device, which would release a massive pulse of energy that would destroy all of the advanced technology in the galaxy, himself included.

He thought of his teammates, of the alliances that he'd fought so hard to forge. He thought of EDI and Joker, the star-crossed lovers no one had seen coming. He thought of Legion, and how he'd sacrificed himself to help insure peace between the Geth and the Quarians, he thought of Liara, and how alone she must feel, thinking that he'd died again. He wouldn't force everyone in the galaxy to evolve into organic-machine hybrids, that was a responsibility he refused to accept, and he wouldn't commit xenocide on the Geth either, he'd have to choose the control option and hope that he could dominate the Reapers' wills long enough to order them to leave, or self-destruct, or something.

Commander Shepard, exhausted, bleeding from multiple injuries, and all but dead on his feet, holstered his pistol and started limping towards the exposed blue energy columns. The Catalyst walked beside him, staring directly at him.

Shepard had almost reached the blue control rods when he took one last look around at the beauty of the Citadel and the battle raging above Earth. He wished his last memory could be a happier one, but it would have to do. He turned back towards the rods and paused. Directly next to the columns that were crackling with energy stood a small pedestal with a holographic interface atop it.

"What's that?" Shepard asked, limping over to stand over it.

"Nothing." The AI said a little too quickly. "A diagnostic station for the Crucible, nothing more."

"Really?" Shepard said, peering at it. "Then why does it say 'Infinite Improbability Generator'?"

"It-it was a joke, by my creators. Pay it no mind, focus on your mission!" The Catalyst said, uncharacteristically nervous.

"You seem awfully agitated." Shepard said, folding his arms and fixing the Catalyst with a piercing stare. "What are so afraid of?"

"Nothing! I mean, nothing, I fear nothing." The avatar of the supercomputer said, but the damage was done.

"I think you're lying, I want to know what this does, and I guess I'll just have to turn it on to find out." As he spoke, the glowing word 'Activate?' appeared above the terminal.

"No wait don't!" But it was too late, Shepard pushed the button, and things went all to hell.

Sparks of lightning arced all around the Crucible and a high-pitched whine filled the air as the central column of light brightened to surpass the light given off by a supernova.

"Aw fuck, now look what you've done." Those were the last words the Catalyst spoke before the Crucible fired.

* * *

><p>Admiral Hacket was trying and failing to coordinate the battered forces of the Galactic Alliance fleet. There were just too many Reapers, and his own ship had taken several bad hits as well. Chaos reigned on the bridge as report after report of devastation rolled in from his command ship's damage control techs.<p>

"Portside fission pile's scrambled, we don't have any coolant left anyway."

"-We've got an overheat, port amidships!"

"-Gun turrets thirteen through twenty-seven no longer reporting!"

"Sir, hull breaches in sectors five through eight, and deck C has been completely gutted. Our mass accelerator cannon is down to sixty-five percent maximum power. Kinetic barriers are offline and our engines are gone." The last tech gulped. "I think they have us, sir."

Admiral Hacket stared at the displays before him. His ship shuddered as it took a glancing blow from one of the Reapers' weapons, which gouged a gaping black tear in the dreadnought's heavy armor plating. A small wave of missiles erupted from the forward launchers in retaliation, but they were nearly all shot down by the Reaper's point-defense cannons.

His ship was dying and the sharks were circling in for the kill.

Suddenly the Citadel, which had opened like a blooming flower, flashed bright white. Everyone, both the Reapers and the attacking allies paused in the carnage and stared at the Citadel. Whatever was going to happen would affect everybody.

Admiral Hacket leaned forward in his chair._ 'Shepard, you've done the impossible so far, let's hope you can do it again.'_ He thought grimly.

The light flashed again, even brighter this time, and suddenly something utterly bizarre happened.

The Reapers turned around and fled. They disengaged from their

various battles and made hard burns for the Charon Mass Relay. They were too late however, as a beam of pure white energy flew from the heart of the Citadel towards the Relay. Following it was a massive spherical white shockwave emanating from the Citadel as well.

"What the-" Was all the Admiral managed to say before the energy washed over his ship. He braced for impact, for the ringing of radiation alarms or some other damage report to come in but it didn't happen. He stared down at himself, relieved that nothing bad had happened, when a startled-sounding squawk interrupted his thoughts. He looked up, and his jaw hit the floor. Literally, his jaw detached itself and hit the floor, where it promptly sprouted legs, arms, and a mouth and started speaking about its thesis on play-dough's impact on Quarian religious ceremonies. Meanwhile the crew, who had all turned into a flock of shockingly pink flamingos, flapped around the bridge, chirping in fright and astonishment. The control consoles all morphed into television sets broadcasting infomercials on flavored dishwashers, and the gunners down in the main batteries were reporting that they would need more fudge in order to complete their mission.

Admiral Hacket tried to restore order, but seeing as his jaw had walked off the bridge in search of a few Quarrians to interview, he couldn't do anything more than gurgle, as he started morphing into a giant can of raspberry soda. His last coherent thought was: _'Shepard, what have you done?'_

* * *

><p>Sitting in the pilot's chair of the Normandy, Joker frantically maneuvered the ship throughout the debris-strewn space around Earth when the pulse washed over the _Normandy_. There were no obvious effects, but then he felt a pair of warm hands pace themselves on his shoulders.

"Joker," A husky voice whispered in his ear. "I'm not sure what this feeling is, is it what you call love?"

The snarky pilot glanced over his shoulder to berate EDI for interrupting him in the middle of flying, and stopped, his eyes bulging. The woman standing behind him looked just like EDI, except she was flesh and blood, with brunette hair and soft dark eyes.

She was also completely naked.

"EDI, I wha-?" The computers ahead of him screamed a warning of an imminent collision and he instinctively grabbed the flight controls and jerked on them, not taking his eyes off of EDI's... assets. He then dropped them just as quickly as his hands registered him grabbing something that was squishy and sopping wet. He tore his eyes from the magnificent view to see that the flight controls had turned into _tongues_.

"Bleck!" One of them spat. "You taste awful!"

"Good lord man, when was the last time you washed your hands?" The other asked.

"What the?" He asked, then there was a flash and Commander Shepard appeared on the bridge next to EDI, who was pawing at joker and

growling slightly. "Commander? How in the? Where did you? What the hell is going on?" Joker bellowed, trying to ignore the fact that EDI had stuck her hands down his pants.

"I'm not sure Joker." The Commander said, staring out the window at the space battle. If one could call it that. He was trying very hard to ignore the sounds coming from not two feet away and was considering bolting from the cockpit.

* * *

><p>Outside the battle had all but ground to a halt. After emitting the strange pulse of energy the Citadel had turned into a giant flower, much to the amazement of everyone watching.<p>

Out of the blackness came a monstrous squid-like eldritch abomination, which grabbed Harbinger's forward tentacles and begged for its forgiveness, shouting that "that bitch Sovereign wasn't good enough for his Harby." The two left shortly afterwards, literally wrapped around each other.

One of the Reapers turned into a bouquet of flowers, which one of the Geth ships grabbed in a tractor beam and floated over to the Quarian command ship. The Geth crew then asked the crew of the Quarian ship out on a single, massive date, which the surprised aliens accepted.

The next thing anyone knew was that the sun was announcing that it was on strike and promptly turned itself off. Plunging the planet Earth (which had turned into a giant cheesecake) into darkness.

One of the Reapers began glowing green and announced that it was now Roger the Reaper, the Rebellious Reject, and that his mission was to hunt down those meddling kids and their dog. It flew off in pursuit of those goals, but was crushed when Darth Vader -one hundred miles tall and bedecked in Egyptian Space Armor- arrived and dropped the Death Star on him. Mecha-Egyptian-Vader then used the Death Star as a bowling ball on the remaining Reapers and managed to create a seven-ten split by doing so.

Albus Dumbledore appeared on all of the spaceships' computer screens and began saying that they shouldn't be killing the Reapers, and that they were merely misguided and had to be led back into the light. A hook entered the frame and yanked him off screen, to be replaced by a pair of Superbowl commentators who began analyzing the battle. Their commentary basically boiled down the the fact that humanity was screwed without some sort of superhero.

As if on cue, Chuck Norris showed up, but was crushed by a horde of rampaging space-orcs. The Covenant arrived to glass the planet, took one look at the craziness and decided to leave. However the infinite improbability field already infected them and their whole crew turned into Swedish supermodels.

A giant bolt of lightning struck the remains of Ambassador Udina on the Citadel and turned him into a zombie, but he was killed shortly thereafter by a huge group of Call of Duty fanboys. They declared him a noob and humped his corpse.

Han Solo flew in to save the day, but wound up crashing into the side

of a Krogan ship. The Krogan aboard it announced that their savior had arrived and bowed before the wreckage of the _Millenium Falcon_.

Samus Aran and the Master Chief began fighting on top of one of the Asari dreadnoughts, but abandoned that in favor of making out once they got each others' helmets off. They didn't question how they could breathe in space, especially since space had long since turned to lime jello, they just lived for the moment.

* * *

><p>Aboard the Normandy, Commander Shepard stared slackjawed at the scene, his brain trying and failing to understand just what the hell was happening. He was on the verge of a psychotic break when there was another flash emanating from the flower-Citadel. Shouting over the grunts and groans coming from the pilot's chair, he managed to get out. "What the fuck is happening now?"

* * *

><p>He woke up on plush, expensive-looking carpet. He glanced around. Him and his entire crew were in what looked to be a foyer for a five-star restaurant. They all got up groggily and looked around.<p>

"How many are in your party, sir?" Shepard jumped and stared at the human-looking waiter standing patiently at the entrance of what looked like a fancy five-star restaurant.

"Umm, I guess all of us?" Shepard said. He was convinced that he was either insane or dreaming and decided to just go with the flow.

"Very well," the being replied. "Would you care for a table or would you rather just go to the bar?"

"The bar." Came several dozen voices. They all filed into the dining area and sat down at the bar.

"What'll it be?" The green, four-armed bartender asked.

"The strongest thing you have." The Commander replied, while the other members of his crew made similar requests. The bartender handed him something called a 'Pan-Galactic Gargle Blaster' and wandered off to fill other orders.

"Cheers!" The human-looking being next to him said, clinking their glasses together. The drink hit Commander Shepard like a truck, and he fell out of his chair. It was like his brains had been smashed out by a lemon wrapped around a large gold brick. The alien next to him helped him back onto his stool.

"First time Gargle Blaster, eh? Don't worry, it'll just get worse." The being offered up a disturbingly wide grin and stuck out his hand. "I'm Ford Prefect by the way. Welcome to Milliways, the Restaurant at the End of the Universe."

Shepard and his crew never left Milliways, they remained there, partying and staying in the Restaurant's hotel rooms, for all of the

end of time.

* * *

><p>Why did I write this?<p>

3. Chapter 3

Alrighty, here's the third chapter in the ongoing epic (snicker). First off let's get some responses in:

****Fayneir:**** Good idea, I might just do that now that you mention it.

****mk14ebr:**** I know about the whole 'Shepard's alive' cutscene, I even got it myself, :). I'll admit I wrote the first chapter out of anger at Bioware, or more accurately, EA's corruption of Bioware. The second chapter (and this one) are more about poking fun at how monumentally bad the endings are. I'm holding out for the Indoctrination Theory to be proven correct, but until then, oh wellâ€|

****GoG ToXiC:**** "But then, if your endings are just going to get crazier... what the hell can you do next?" Challenge Accepted.

* * *

><p>Chapter 3 - The Ultimate Showdown Part 1: Convergence.

* * *

><p>Aboard the Covenant Holy City High Charity, Eighth Age of Fornicationâ€|

At the trial of the Sangheili Infiltrator tasked with monitoring the situation of Mass Effectâ€|

A lone Elite clad in bright gold armor stood in the middle of a courtroom-style room. The curving purple walls were illuminated by softly glowing blue lights emanating from groves on every surface. The benches lining two of the walls were packed with every Covenant species: Unggoy, Yanme'e, Jiralhanae, Kig-yar, and even here and there Mgalekgolo and non-royal San'shyuum.

He spoke. "There were only three endings."

"Three, are you sure?"

Before him hovered three royal-red clad Prophets, floating on hoverchairs. Their small heads adorned with ornate golden crowns.

"Yes, they were 'Destruction', 'Control', or 'Synthesis'." He replied, summing up a one hundred-page report in one sentence.

The one to the Elite's left spoke.

"Why were they not varied and meaningful like the rest of the

series?" It demanded.

"They were corrupted, and Casey Hudson claimed that they would be more satisfying. But I investigated and sought to uncover the truth with all the forces at my command." There was scattered murmuring at this. Then the Prophet to his right spoke.

"When you beheld Mass Effect 3, were you blinded by its majesty?"

"Blinded?" The Elite replied, slightly miffed that they believed anything would distract him from his mission.

"Paralyzed, dumbstruck?" One of the other two corrected.

"No!" The Elite responded, filling with pride at his dedication to the mission.

"But EA was able to acquire the rights to Bioware, put their own people on the team, and desecrate it with their filthy clutches!" One of the Prophets cried in an outrage.

"Noble Hierarchs," The Elite pleaded with them. "Certainly you must realize that once the Stock Market went downâ€¦" He trailed off as cries of outrage began to echo through the room.

"There will be order in this council!" One of the Prophets bellowed, slamming a fist down on the armrest of his hoverchair. The prophet in the center, who had not yet spoken, floated forward, and all eyes focused on him.

"The loss of Bioware to EA was not your fault, but these endings, these broken promisesâ€¦"

"By the time I realized their intent, there was nothing I could do." The Elite whispered. The room exploded in muttering again, while the Prophets convened for their own private meeting. The Elite stared resolutely ahead, awaiting the Hierarchs' judgment. Finally the leader, the Prophet of Pleasure, floated forward, raising one arm for calm.

"You are one of our finest commanders, long have you served our Covenant with honor and distinction, and there was nothing you could have done to change the ending." The Prophet paused as the Elite bowed his head in shame. The San'Shyuum seemed to be considering something, and then he continued. "That is why we are offering you a chance at redemption."

The Elite's head snapped up, his eyes blazing with fervor.

"We will put you at the head of our most powerful fleet, the Fleet of Righteous Indignation. You will use every means at your disposal to change the final battle."

The Elite's right hand flew to his chest so fast he was in danger of cracking the bones in his hand. "I will not fail you, most merciful Hierarchs!"

* * *

><p>Darth Vader strode purposefully across the bridge of the Executor. His master, as a combination birthday and apology gift, had presented the flagship to him a few weeks ago. After the destruction of the Death Star at the hands of the hotshot rebel pilot, Palpatine had been understandably upset. The loss of such an investment had sunk the Empire's credit rating and it would be a pain in the exhaust port (heh) to build it back up. The Emperor had called him as his TIE Advanced was being patched up, and wellâ€¦ the both said things they weren't proud of. Darth Vader had called his master a doddering old fool who had to use the force to get anyone in bed with him, and Palpatine had called Vader a whiny, emo bitch who was still hung up about the same girl years after she died.

Needless to say, the day after the fight, when they had cooled off, they had called each other and awkwardly apologized for their actions, though things were still tense between them. Then the other day the Emperor had summoned him back to Imperial Center for a meeting of high admirals and lords. When he arrived, however, he discovered that his master had arranged a massive surprise party for him and had the _Executor_ to eclipse the sun over the house when the gifts were presented. It was the best birthday Vader had ever had, even if the only thing he could remember from it was waking up the next morning in bed with two Twi'lek dancers and smelling strongly of Corellian ale.

He reached the primary command deck and gazed out of the viewports at the endless panorama of space. Occasionally he would catch a glimpse of one of the Emperor-II Class Star Destroyers that formed the picket net around his _Executor_-Class Star Dreadnought. He now commanded one of the most powerful fleets in the galaxy, and he had no idea what to do with it.

'_Hmm, I could go around chasing the rebels, although that doesn't sound like much funâ€¦ Wait! I'll go to Naboo and kill all of the Gungans! Then I could go to Endor and kill all of the Ewoks! I'll become so much more popular in the eyes of the Galaxy! It's brilliant!_' _

Just as he was about to turn to Admiral Ozzel, that incompetent fool, a wave of pure rage and agony swept through the Force. Vader staggered across the command deck. The raw energy that surge in the Dark Side possessed was like a physical blow, and Vader's raspy metallic breathing quickened along with his pulse at the sweet, delicious power flooded his being. It was like basking in the sun, drinking beer, banging three supermodels, and shooting up glitterstim all at once!

And then abruptly it ended, leaving Vader feeling even emptier than usual. He took a moment to steady himself and catch his breath. He glanced around and noticed that all of the bridge officers were staring. He growled slightly and drew himself up to his rather impressive full height. Instantly every eye snapped back to their duty station and everyone's muscles locked completely rigid. Vader scowled underneath his helmet and stormed off the bridge, making a mental note to strangle random members of the bridge crew when he was in a better mood. As he strode down the hall a relatively young captain -Pee, or Pie, or Pirouette, or something- cautiously approached him, desperately trying to control his fear.

It didn't help in the least, for Vader basked in fear and hatred; it

gave him power, which is why he killed so many of his subordinates. For one thing, it ensured that everyone on his ship was the best and brightest at what they could do, and the other reason was the atmosphere of fear, hate, and distrust it fostered fed Vader's Force abilities; just being on the ship made him stronger, the Dark Side permeated the very essence of the _Executor._

Captain Piety stood before Vader and saluted smartly. "Lord Vader, the Emperor commands you to make contact with him, sir."

"Very well." Vader said, stepping around captain Peephole and into his private chamber, sealing the door behind him.

He knelt on the glowing holographic terminal on the ground, speaking in a low voice to the glowing hologram in front of him.

"What is thy bidding, my master?"

"There is a great disturbance in the Force." The old man said simply, obviously referring to the surge in Dark Side energy a few minutes ago.

"I have felt it." Vader replied simply, having learned long ago that Sideous preferred swift, simple reports.

"I sense that its focus is not here, but rather elsewhere." The hologram paused for a moment as if thinking, then spoke again. "It is centered around the company, BioWare. They have driven their fans to hatred. I have no doubt the rage we sensed was caused by the ending to Mass Effect 3."

"How is that possible?" Vader was genuinely confused, the Mass Effect Universe always seemed so well-run and satisfying, unlike his own Universe, which seemed like it was always changing, and some parts of it seemed incredibly half-assed.

"Search your feelings, Lord Vader, you know it to be true." He paused again. "This could affect us, trigger rebellions among our own fans against Bioware's games."

"They're just fans of Mass Effect." Vader countered, keeping his tone submissive. "They won't affect us."

"They are very angry." The Emperor replied. "The fanbase of BioWare must not be allowed to boycott our games."

"If the endings could be changed by us, then they would make powerful allies." Vader pointed out.

Palpatine's sagging; aged face broke out in a leering grin, displaying numerous cracked and rotting teeth. "Yes, they would be great assets." He remembered himself and fixed his apprentice with a stern glare. "Can it be done?"

"The endings will change for us, or be destroyed, my master. " The hologram faded and Vader stood up. He had a fleet to deploy and heads to crack. When this was coupled with the surge in Force energy earlier, well, it was shaping up to be a splendid day.

* * *

><p>"Ah, yes Harry, do come in and have a seat. Would you care for a lemon drop?" The kindly old headmaster greeted the teenaged wizard as he walked through his office door.<p>

"No thank you, sir." The green-eyed boy replied, glancing around the office at the various books, trunks, and knick-knacks. The aged warlock nodded and gazed at him, his eyes seemed sad and devoid of their customary twinkle. Harry returned the stared uneasily, trying not to stare at the blackened hand poking out of the right sleeve of Dumbledore's robes.

At last, the headmaster seemed to give a little shake and sighed. "Harry, I'm quite certain this is the last thing you want to hear, but there has been another prophecy. It concerns you, my dear boy."

Harry's blood ran cold and his face turned absolutely white. Suddenly it was last year, with him being told that he was the only one who could kill Voldemort. The pain, anguish, and utter self-hatred that manifested then returned with full force as he recalled Sirius' death. Siriusâ€|

"Harry," Dumbledore spoke softly, his eyes glistening slightly. The teenager shook off the stupor and gazed at his mentor. "Please, I know it's the last thing you want to hear, but I believe the information contained within this prophecy could hold the key to defeating Tom once and for all."

He pointed his wand at the cabinet and levitated his Pensieve out and on to his desk. He placed the tip of his wand against his wrinkled temple and extracted a silvery strand of memory, which he deftly flicked onto the silvery surface of the substance in the bowl. The surface swirled, and Professor Trelawny's ghostly figure appeared above the surface. She began to speak, in her harsh, 'prophet' voice.

"_The power to destroy the Dark Lord approachesâ€| It comes as the third game dies! The Dark Lord shall not comprehend this power, for it is the most awesome force in the galaxy! And it shall totally fuck his shit up, for it is made of sheer badassery at its finest! The power to destroy the Dark Lord approachesâ€| It comes as the third game dies!"_

Harry stared at his headmaster, flabbergasted. "Er, sir?"

"Yes Harry, you undoubtedly have a few questions."

"Sir, what did she mean by 'It comes as the third game dies?' And that part, where it saidâ€| 'And it shall totally, erh, mess his stuff up'. Are you certain this is a real prophecy?"

"Very certain, Harry." Dumbledore replied in a kindly tone. "This might be a little hard to understand, but you must understand, this is the key to everything."

Harry nodded and sat up a little straighter.

"Imagine if you would, a hall of mirrors. Each one is angled so it only reflects a little of the previous mirror. Now let's say that you

traveled from one end of the hall to the other, what would you say the last mirror would look like in comparison to the first?"

"I'd imagine they'd look nothing alike, sir." He replied.

"Exactly," Dumbledore said, beaming. "Now, imagine that they weren't just mirrors, but other Universes, each one had similarities to the ones next to them, but take two very separate ones and they'd be completely different."

"Sir," Harry said. "This is all very fascinating, but what does it have to do with Voldemort?"

"Yes, the power she was referring to comes from one of these alternate Universes, or so I am led to believe. You see, all humans, magical and muggle alike can touch these other realities and occasionally peer into them. This mostly happens in the subconscious, where they aren't aware of it. Usually it manifests as dreams, or odd feelings of being watched or not being alone. Occasionally however, a person has a strong enough connection to one of these Universes to glean several things from it. In several cases individuals with this gift have used that knowledge to start a fictional "to them at least- account of what they've learned."

Harry stared at the old wizard in shock. Was he saying that he could see into another reality, and others could do the same? He felt very exposed all of a sudden, as if millions of eyes were watching his every move all at once. The headmaster went on.

"It is my firmest belief, that the 'game' Professor Trelawny referred to in this Prophecy was the third game in a series based on one of these dimensional windows. I worked closely with the Department of Mysteries to discern which one it could be, for that Universe could hold the key to defeating Voldemort. Eventually, we figured out which one."

Dumbledore took his glasses off with his left hand and rubbed his eyes wearily.

"Alas, we cannot tell you about the Universe this series was based off of, for it has not been released yet, and won't be for years. We attempted to scry the future to learn what the power might be, but we were unable to learn anything other than the name. The name of the game is 'Mass Effect', though we know not what this means or what the game could entail. It could be implying that the power to defeat Voldemort is gravity, although I highly doubt that."

He chuckled, while Harry turned his thoughts inward. _'So, the power I'll need to defeat the Dark Tosser is in another reality, and someone released, er, will release a game about it, but we don't know what it could involve.'_

"Sir," He spoke aloud. "Couldn't you just look into the Universe to see what is there?"

"We tried, Harry, we tried." The old man said sadly. "We were unable to get anything beyond a confusing jumble of images. I'm sad to say that the only way to find out is to go yourself."

A ringing silence followed that statement. "Sir, you want me to go to

an alternate Universe, by myself? To look for the power that will allow me to kill Voldemort?"

"Not alone, my dear boy." Dumbledore smiled slightly. "We'd send you with a pair of highly trained Unspeakables. And we would make your safety a top priority as you search for the power to vanquish Voldemort. Harry, I've asked you for far more than I should ever have a right to ask you for, and now I must ask you again to put everything on the line for us."

Harry's face darkened as he fell into himself and brooded for five minutes. Eventually he spoke, without looking up from staring at his lap. "Professor?"

"Yes Harry?"

"If there are other Universes out there, could thereâ€¦ is thereâ€¦ is there one where my parents are alive?"

"Harry, my dear boy, you can't possibly be thinking of running away-"

"NO!" Harry's head snapped up, a fire blazing in his eyes. "I just, I'd just want to meet them once, to just, see them aliveâ€¦" He trailed off and the fierce look left his eyes, leaving a hollow look of emptiness and sorrow behind.

"Harry," Dumbledore said softly, tears sparkling in his blue eyes. "I promise you, after Voldemort has been defeated I will introduce you to your parents myself. I'm sure they'd be very, very proud of you."

"Then let's get started." Harry said with determination. "Who are the Unspeakables I'm working with?"

"Oh," Said the headmaster, valiantly fighting off a smile. "I'm sure you know these two _quite_ well." He gestured and the door flew open to admit the red-haired Weasley twins: Fred and George.

"Hiya Harry!" They chorused as one.

Harry stared, openmouthed at them for a moment, before bursting into laughter. He fell to the ground, rolling and convulsing he was laughing so hard. Dumbledore just smiled and looked on as the two put affronted looks on their faces. Every time Harry seemed to calm down he'd glance up at the twins and break into fresh peals of laughter.

"Brother of mine-" One twin began.

"Yes?"

"I do believe-"

"-Mr. Potter-"

"-Doesn't take us seriously."

"Too right-"

"-When have-

"-We ever-

"-Given you reason not to trust us?" They finished together as Harry howled with laughter, clutching his sides. Eventually he pulled himself back together and stood, grinning.

"Merlin, thanks for the laugh mates, but seriously, where are the Unspeakables?"

"Oh Gred?"

"Yes Forge?"

"I do believe-

"-That he doesn't believe us."

"But, but I meanâ€¦" Harry tried to come up with a good argument.

"You see Harry-" Began Fred, or was it George?

"-The Unspeakables approached us when we were ten-

"-Right after we did our first bit of accidental magic-

"-Yeah, that was good, we blew Xeno's chicken coop sky high, we did.-"

"-Bloke never seemed to mind-

"-Oh no, he was right pleased with us actually, mentioned some thing about gratchbeetle infestation. Anyways-

"-the Department of Mysteries wanted us to come and work for them, said that we somehow shared our magical cores with each other-

"-Right rare thing that is-

"-And because of that each of us had twice the magic of a normal wizard. They offered us jobs at the tender young age of ten, bless them-

"-And appealed to our ten-year-old sense of adventure, bloody tricksters." One of them spoke fondly.

"-They made us swear oaths never to tell anyone what they did, and told us that to maintain our cover we'd have to act goofy and immature for our entire school career."

"It was perfect, no one would ever in a million years suspect that we were, in fact, already being trained by the Department of Mysteries-

"-And mum said we'd never accomplish anything." One said with no hint of malice and a slight smile.

"So let me get this straight." Harry said, thinking hard. "They recruited you two when you were ten because of your raw power, made you swear not to tell anyone and play merry-hell with everyone in school, all so no one would ever suspect you were really Unspeakables. And to hide your abilities you deliberately failed every one of your classes?"

The twins glanced at each other and then turned to face him. "Exactly." They said as one.

"Brilliant!" Harry cried. "I'd never see that coming, but when did he find out?" He gestured at Dumbledore.

"I knew since day one, Harry." The old man said, his eyes twinkling. "But I wasn't allowed to say anything because of oaths I swore to the head of the Department of Mysteries, who I had to get permission from before telling you. Incidentally, in order to complete their training one or both of the twins had to leave the school for weeks on end, so the DoM issued them time turners."

The twins nodded and pulled the hourglasses from within their robes to show Harry before stuffing them away out of sight again.

"So every once in a while there were two Freds or Two Georges running around while the other was off being trained?" Harry ventured.

"How did you know that?" The twins asked as one.

"It just seemed like the kind of thing you blokes would do." Harry Replied with a wry grin.

The twins glanced at each other. "Fair enough."

"So Harry-

"-The little brother we never had-

"-What about Ron?"

"Not the son of a Marauder."

"Point."

"So Harry-

"-Are you ready-

"-For a whirlwind trip of fun and debauchery-

"-Across time and space?"

Harry still had questions, but they could wait, as the twins grabbed him about the shoulders and marched him out of the room.

"By the way Harry-

"-Oh yes, this is important."

"We don't go by our real names in the Department of Mysteries-

"Otherwise they'd have to ditch the 'Mysteries' part, and then where would that leave us?"

"So just remember, I'm Thing One-"

"And I'm Thing Two." The other finished, sending Harry into fresh peals of laughter, much to the twins' chagrin.

* * *

><p>"James Raynor." Zeratul spoke urgently from the view screen from where he was on the planet Raynor's Raiders were orbiting. "One of our extradimensional experiments has just gone very wrong, you have three seconds to-" What James Raynor had three seconds to do, he never found out, because at that moment a flash of light enveloped him and everything vanished.<p>

* * *

><p>"So it is decided, the endings must be re-written. And you," Elrond gestured at the assembled soldiers. "Must carry out this task, but what to call you?"<p>

"Yo dude," The Hippie-Elf named Let's-Get-Smashed said, clouds of smoke surrounding his dreadlock-adorned head. "I made friendship bracelets for us, cause it's like, spiritual, you know? Duuuddde, what were we talking about?"

"Bracelets." Elrond muttered, narrowing his bloodshot eyes and taking another drag on his joint. "So be it!" He declared to the stoned and/or absolutely hammered individuals in front of him. "You shall be the Brotherhood of the Bracelet!"

* * *

><p>"It is our ongoing mission, to boldly go where no one has gone bef-"<p>

"Captain Picard, I'm picking up a space-time anomaly!"

"Oh fuck, another one? Are you serio-"

* * *

><p>"Now, would you kindly go to the Mass Effect Universe, and change those Goddamned endings?"<p>

* * *

><p>"Skyeye here, did anyone see Mobius One? He just dropped off the radar coverage!"<p>

* * *

><p>"Riff, why are you messing around with the DFA?"<p>

"Everything's fine, Torg, see?"

ZAPPPPO!

* * *

><p>"Sir, I don't think building a flux capacitor is quite what your father had in mind when he left you his old notes."<p>

"JARVIS, what did I tell you about stopping me when I'm on a role?"

ZAPPPPO!

* * *

><p>"I am Optimus Prime, leader of the Autobots!"<p>

ZAPPPPO!

* * *

><p>"Ash, why is Arceus glowing like that?"<p>

"I don't know Mistyâ€|"

ZAPPPPO!

* * *

><p>"I AM CHUCK FUCKING NORRIS! AND THESE ENDINGS ARE BULLSHIT, WE'LL SEE ABOUT THIS!"<p>

* * *

><p>And so it begins.<p>

4. Chapter 4

****Author's Preamble: ****

****(Warning: this is a long intro, if you want you can just skip ahead to the next bold text)****

Alrighty, here's the much-anticipated second part of The Ultimate Showdown section of 'Screw This, I'm Firing the Halo Array'. In this chapter the forces of all the major Universes converge upon the Mass Effect Universe in an effort to change the godawful endings. Will they succeed? How will they react to one another? What will Shepard think of all this? Why the hell am I asking you all these questions? XD

It took a few months for me to get around to writing this, things were hectic for me. But now I'm back, yay!

So, first off let's get some personal responses out of the way.

One Over Infinity: I know that none of my endings will ever have a chance in hell of coming true, that's why I have so much fun with the idea. In my opinion, I don't care if the "real" ending was so awful, because I can write it so that Shepard fights side by side with the

Arbiter, while Darth Vader coordinates the space battle and Mobius One single-handedly secures air superiority over the Reaper Air Forces. That, in my mind, is so much better than the dollop of dog shit Bioware/EA handed to us as ME 3's ending. Thanks for the review though, it really made me think, whether or not that was your intention. :)

Crow T R0bot: You're welcome for the laughs, and I hope you laugh at this chapter, cause this has been a hoot and a half to write. I'll take that idea about Kahn into consideration, and let me just say that those armies I showed last chapter aren't the only ones that are coming! ;)

Dark demon619: I honestly forgot about the Cogs from Gears of War *Shame face*, and was considering putting the Warhammer 40K Space Marines in, except I know almost nothing about that Universe. Suffice to say, I've done some research, and now I'm ready. So expect them to show up.

GoG Toxic: "So! Now what?" Now? Now there will be ass-kicking on levels never before seen in this Galaxy! Bwahahahahaha!

Everyone else who reviewed: Thank you, I do read every review and I'm glad you took the time to read this neat little pile of insanity. :)
â€"GH

One final couple of notes: I wrote this entire thing blasting to various heroic soundtracks, mostly from the Mass Effect Soundtrack along with some Two Steps from Hell. I particularly liked the song Heart of Courage, but everything's up to you.

Also, just because I didn't mention a specific Universe in the gathering of forces last chapter doesn't mean that a specific one won't show up in this chapter. Most likely it's because I forgot about that one, or I just didn't think I could do it justice at the time. Needless to say, there'll be no shortage of people fighting by the time this chunk of the ongoing story is done. (And no, this isn't the last chapter, I've still got more, muwahahahahaha!) And now, on with the show!

Oh, and all of the characters/starships/technology etc. are the sole property of their creators, I'm just playing with their toys in the sandbox of my imagination. Please excuse my insanity. :)

* * *

><p>Chapter 4 â€" The Ultimate Showdown:
Convergence

* * *

><p>The Sovereign-Class Federation Starship USS Enterprise E shook and rattled as the vessel was enveloped by the bizarre space-time distortion. Captain Picard held onto the arms of his chair and clenched his hands until the knuckles turned white. The other members of the command crew, including Lt Commander Worf, who was on the ship visiting his old crew, were grasping whatever surfaces they could find for dear life as the ship's gravity oscillated wildly. Shouts filled the air over a loud rumbling pervading the ship, but no one could make anything out. The _Enterprise_ was bucking and

twisting like an enraged stallion, and soon warning klaxons began blaring through the muffled background roar, and the normally white bridge lighting turned dark red to indicate battle stations.

"Sir!" Data called out to the Captain from his console. "Our shields are failing and I'm detecting immense stress being placed on the outer hull, if this doesn't end soon-"

However, before he could finish that sentence the ship wrenched itself sideways and the metal seemed to scream like a dying dinosaur. One of the consoles exploded, killing the obligatory red-shirt that happened to be sitting in front of it. Picard cursed under his breath; that red-shirt was the third one who'd died this week! If things kept going the way they were, people would stop signing up for enlisted duty aboard starships.

His train of thought was cut off abruptly as the rumbling faded away and the klaxons stopped blaring. He sighed and looked up, hardly caring right at the moment. He felt a tremendous headache coming on.

"Sir," Data reported. "The space-time anomaly appears to have dissipated, and all systems are functioning normally. Everything is in perfect working order."

"No major damage Captain." Worf reported from his position. "Aside from a few casualties caused by the shaking and systems' overloading we haven't taken any real losses."

"Bridge, this is engineering," Lt Commander LaForge's voice came in over the intercom. "What was that? One minute we're monitoring normal outflows of cooling plasma and the next the ship feels like it's shaking itself apart and the sensors are going nuts!"

"We fell through some sort of space-time warp commander LaForge," Captain Picard replied. "Is there anything wrong with the engines?"

"Another one? Commander Riker owes me a drink. He thought we'd meet another planet-eating entity this week." Commander LaForge chuckled. "The engines are fine captain, we're ready to go anytime."

Captain Picard killed the connection just as Data began speaking again. "Sir, I've brought the forward sensors back online." The static-filled screen at the front of the bridge flickered and resolved itself into an image of space.

The bridge crew gasped as one. Before them a planet lay burning. The sun was on the far side of the world, but that didn't matter as country-sized fires were blazing across the surface. Bright flashes illuminated the space surrounding the planet. The space-time anomaly had dropped them right on the edge of a warzone!

"Data," Captain Picard began, shaking off the stupor that had set in at the sight. "Where in God's name are we?"

"Cross-referencing star charts now, sir." The android replied, tapping furiously away on his keyboard. "Sir," He paused, displaying what appeared to be shock as he turned to face the captain. "According to the computer, we are at Earth."

The entire bridge was deadly silent as the horrified crew stared out the viewscreen at the smoldering planet before them.

"Earthâ€¦" Commander Riker whispered. "Mother of Godâ€¦"

"Red alert." The captain ordered. "Raise shields. Data, scan for life-forms."

"Scanning now." He replied, after a moment he looked up from his console. "Sir, I am not detecting any traces of human settlements on the surface of Earth, the planet has been almost completely sterilized. All that remains are a few scattered pockets of human life and a sizeable population of cybernetic organisms. Roughly one-point-five billion."

Cybernetics. Picard's blood ran absolutely cold, long-buried memories surging to the forefront of his mind. "Is it the Borg?" He asked sharply.

"Negative Captain, they have a strange bio-signature, I've never seen anything like it." He paused. "Sir, I am detecting a high concentration of life in orbit. Many of the bio-signatures match human signatures, but the vast majority of them are not in the database at all. Furthermore their ships don't match any known designs in the database." He turned to the captain. "Sir, I don't think we are in our Universe anymore."

Picard thought for a long moment before issuing more orders. "Bring up an image of the battle in orbit, and get me some more information."

"Yes sir." The main viewscreen brought up an image of multiple ships engaged in combat. Missiles and streaks of light flashed between vessels of diverse structures, and massive purple warships that vaguely resembled squid. As they watched one of the non-cephalopod-like vessels turned directly towards one of the purple ships and fired something out of its bow. It impacted with barely a flash several meters from the other ship's hull. One of the opposing ships' digits moved to point at the offending ship, and with a flash of red light the other vessel was sheared in half.

The crew winced. "Sir," Data reported. "There were approximately two hundred humans on that ship that was just destroyed, all of them were killed."

In a snap Picard made his decision. He might not know what the hell was going on, but something out there was aggressively killing both humans and aliens allied with said humans. He was going to intervene, but first he needed to get some information. He glanced back at the viewscreen as another ship, similar to the first one, fell victim to the deadly beam attack.

"Commander Data, scan for defenses and radio transmissions, what are we up against?" Picard asked.

He nodded, cocking his head as if listening to something. "I'm picking up radio transmissions on the low-end of our receiving capabilities, none of it is superluminal. Based on what I'm hearing, I'd say that the fleet filled with diverse ships is a conglomerate of

non-human and human forces called 'The Alliance', and the larger, more powerful vessels are all of the same species, called 'Reapers.' He paused, his brow furrowing. "Captain, I do not believe that the Reaper ships are in fact ships."

"What do you mean?" Picard asked.

"Based on my scans, they are incredibly advanced cyborgs, each one containing a massive core of organic material, surrounded by a hull of incredibly strong alloy. Strange, none of the biomass contains the same genetic structure; no two Reapers even remotely resemble each other genetically. It's almost like—" He paused again, as if stunned, as his incredibly advanced brain came to a horrifying conclusion. "Captain, I believe that these Reapers might take conquered species, and either create new Reapers or repair damaged ones with the conquered species' biomass."

It took all of Picard's willpower to stop from throwing up. This was worse than the Borg. At least they let the bodies of their fallen remain separate, and there was a chance for a cure, however remote it might be. These Reapers, they left the Borg in the dust.

Commander Worf growled. "Using the dead to bolster their own ranks, that is a coward's tactic."

Picard waved for quiet. Their motives didn't matter, stopping them did. "Data, their weaponry, what are we up against?"

"The armaments of the Alliance ships consist of megawatt-range laser cannons, multiple missiles armed with nuclear or standard explosive warheads. In addition, all Alliance ships sport at least one massive railgun that runs the length of the ship." He double-checked his readings. He couldn't believe any space-faring species would use such crude and underpowered weaponry. "I'm not detecting any warp signatures or impulse drives, all propulsion comes from inefficient matter/antimatter annihilation. However, I am detecting curious mass distortion effects surrounding each ship, which is oddly advanced considering how low-tech their weaponry is. I'm not detecting any energy shields that correspond to our parameters, however I am detecting sizable gravity anomalies surrounding each ship. It's possible they're using this mass-distortion technology to shield themselves." Data concluded his report.

"There's not much power there." Commander Riker commented. "They might as well be using sharp sticks and harsh language."

Data continued. "The Reaper warships contain sizable caches of missiles, and each one sports a massive railgun, which based on the sheer size of the barrel can likely accelerate a projectile to a good portion of the speed of light. In addition, each of the Reapers' 'arms' contains a device capable of projecting a stream of molten metal at relativistic speeds. The weapon design is inefficient, but moderately powerful compared to a standard phaser beam. The mass-distortion effects projected by each Reaper ship are much stronger than those of the Alliance, which indicates that they have superior 'shields', and I believe they use the effect for propulsion as well. Their hull alloy is made of an ultra-dense, unknown material, I've never seen anything like it."

"Thank you Data," The captain said, glad to know they weren't up

against anything too dangerous, but he wouldn't let his guard down just yet.

"Sir," An ensign called from the rear of the bridge. "I'm receiving a broad-wave transmission, extremely low-frequency."

"On-screen." The captain ordered. A gray-haired human in a strange uniform appeared on the viewscreen. He had a stern, scarred face and tired blue eyes. Picard knew that as a broad-wave transmission he wasn't contacting them personally, and decided to leave off contact until after they heard what he had to say.

"Listen up everyone, this is admiral Hackett. I won't sugarcoat it, we're not winning this, but we have to keep fighting! Keep it up and open a hole in the Reaper lines so Shepard can get through. I don't think I have to remind you that if she can't make it to the Crucible, then all life in the galaxy will fall before the Reaper onslaught. Fight to the last breath, and hold the line. Hackett out."

Picard thought briefly, from the sound of things these Reapers were a grave threat to all of galactic stability. Any lingering doubts he had about intervening vanished. Alternate Universe or not, regulations or not, there was a threat to galactic peace out there, and it was killing the defenders of said peace. He and his ship would do all in their power to resist it.

"Commander Riker, I think it's about time we made our presence known." His bearded commander smirked, but before he could continue Worf interrupted him.

"Sir, I've detected a Reaper vessel inbound at subluminal speed, it is closing rapidly."

"Commander Riker." Picard handed off control of the battle to his XO.

"Lock phasers on the inbound Reaper and compliment with a spread of torpedoes." He ordered confidently, smirking as he watched the approaching cyborg on the screen.

The Enterprise banked smoothly through space, coming around to face its opponent. The moment the Reaper came into range, the tips of its arms glowed red, preparing its Thanix weapons. However, before it fired, a strip on the underside of the saucer-shaped the hull of the sleek spacecraft ahead of it glowed orange. A thin beam of light lanced out at the Reaper at faster-than-light speeds. A blue shimmer appeared directly in the path of the oncoming phaser beam, but it collapsed almost instantly as the energy lance punched through the kinetic barriers like toilet paper. The beam of energy pierced the ship, tearing a gaping, glowing hole through every layer of armor on it and continuing out the other side.

As the attack beam faded the cyborg spaceship writhed in agony, its arms spasming and throwing molten metal in all directions, the Enterprise had engaged in evasive maneuvers by then, not expecting their initial attack to cripple the warship so badly. It was pure luck that one of the shots managed to connect with the ship. But the molten metal merely splattered against the energy bubble around the ship, and it did no significant damage. Several blue missiles fired out from the 'neck' of the Enterprise in retaliation, soaring

through space at the twitching mecha-squid. They flew right through where the downed kinetic barriers used to be and impacted with the hole torn in the Reaper's hull. With a blinding flash the photon torpedoes detonated, cracking the Reaper into a dozen pieces and incinerating the core of the ship in a fireball.

On the bridge of the Enterprise the crew watched as the two-kilometer long craft disintegrated.

"Well, that was incredibly easy." Commander Riker commented.

"Captain," Worf announced. "We are being hailed."

"By who?" Riker asked.

"It's the Alliance, their admiral Hackett." The Klingon replied.

"On-screen." Picard ordered.

The aging admiral's visage appeared on the forward viewscreen. His eyes widened in surprise at seeing captain Picard and his crew.

"This is admiral Hackett, whoever you are, you just destroyed a Reaper single-handedly in a ship the size of a heavy cruiser. That's both impressive and heartening, because it means you're at least willing to fight alongside us. We only just now noticed you were here and were wondering what sort of ship you were in. Pardon me for being so blunt, but who the hell are you people and where did you get such advanced weaponry?"

"My name is captain Jean Luc Picard of the United Federation of Planets starship USS Enterprise." The captain stated formally, using his full title. He saw the admiral's eyes narrow at the mention of the Federation. It was as they thought: this wasn't their Universe. "And we hail from an alternate Universe, as impossible as that sounds."

Hackett blinked, then blinked again. He was half-convinced this man was out of his mind, but the idea made some sense, especially considering he'd just one-shotted a Reaper dreadnought.

Captain Picard continued. "Admiral, despite the fact that we aren't from here we are more than willing to offer assistance and an alliance."

Hackett shook off his disbelief. Whatever was really going on, there was a ship out there that possessed formidable firepower and willing to offer aid against the Reapers. That meant that the ship's crew could be plush doll bears for all he cared. "You have my eternal thanks captain, we'll prioritize targets and send the data over as soon as we can get it."

"Very good admiral," Picard replied. "I'll look forward to meeting you in person when this is all over." He turned to address the helmsman. "Helm, give me full impulse power, take us into the heart of things."

* * *

><p>On the bridge of the dreadnaught Everest, Hackett watched with wide eyes as the bizarre ship that had come to their aid accelerated at a rate that would turn any of their ships into paste. It dove into the middle of the space battle raging between his rapidly dwindling forces and the Reapers, moving as much agility as an atmosphere-bound fighter jet. It wove through the glowing wreckage of dozens of his cruisers and the three Reapers they had managed to kill. He watched as it evaded two bursts from the Thanix weapons the Reapers were so fond of, and returned fire with three lances of orange-colored light fired from the saucer-shaped forward hull. These streams of energy seemed tiny in comparison to the Reapers' weapons, but they punched through the Reaper's formidable kinetic barriers like wet tissue paper and blasted gaping, glowing holes in the targeted Reaper's body. His surprise turned to utter shock as the damaged Reaper's running lights flickered and died and the ship began to tumble uncontrollably. It was _dead._

'_With them on our side we might be able to turn the tide against the Reapers, but we have to keep that ship safe, if it falls we're right back where we started.' _He realized quickly.

"Attention all ships!" He shouted into the fleet-wide comm channels. "We've got a VIP ship out there, unique design, designation: _Enterprise_. This is top priority: protect that ship at all costs; it's our only effective weapon against the Reapers. Repeat: protect the vessel _Enterprise _at _all costs. _Hackett out."

"Sir!" His sensors operator called out from his left. "I'm reading activity out at the Charon Mass Relay."

"Is it reinforcements?" Hackett asked, hoping he was right.

"N-negative, sir." The young man's voice was shaking badly. "It's more Reapers, sir. "

"How many?"

"A-all of them, I think. At least a hundred thousand."

Hackett almost fainted. That had to be nearly every one in existence. There was no way they could stand up to that many Reaper warships, not even with the new power of the _Enterprise _on their side.

"This is it." He whispered to himself. "Our last stand is here." He had no illusions about them surviving; the Mass Relay was now cut off, and even if they ran at FTL speeds they would never be able to reach any staging points before the Reapers could. They had their backs against the wall, and the firing squad was taking aim at them.

"Ladies and gentlemen," He announced to his bridge crew, who had gone dead quiet at the sensor officer's proclamation. "It's been an honor and a privilege to have served with you. I won't sugarcoat it people: we are going to die. Every Reaper in the galaxy is here, and they are hell-bent on destroying us. There's no help coming, no magic supply of reinforcements waiting to come in and save the day, and we can't run, there'll be nowhere to go by the time we get there. There's just

us, battered and broken. Our last hope was for Commander Shepard to reach the Crucible, but with all the Reapers here, I doubt she'll make it before they destroy the Citadel and us along with it. If anyone wants to leave now, or give up, I will neither stop you nor blame you. You've put up a hell of a fight so far, and you've made me proud to call you all comrades in arms. As for myself: I intend to make it so these Reaper bastards fear this cycle's inhabitants for millennia to come! If you're with me, thank you for being there to fight one last battle for this old man. If not, I don't blame you, I've asked everything of you before, who am I to ask anything else?"

Not one crewmember budged an inch from their spots, before they each turned to their stations and began doing their duties once more, diligent and defiant to the end. Tears came to Hackett's eyes, partially from the display of loyalty and commitment, but mostly from the fact that so many brave souls: humans, aliens, male, female, were about to be wiped from existence. No one would ever know of their courage, their dedication. Once the Reapers crushed them they'd wipe out any evidence, and no one would remain to sing the praises of these fallen soldiers, no one.

Hackett turned his eyes towards the ceiling of the bridge. He wasn't a religious man by any stretch of the imagination, but now for the first time in his life, he whispered a prayer to God.

"If anyone up there is listening, anyone at all, we could use a miracle right now." He glanced down at his personal display screen. The Reaper fleet was bearing down on the beleaguered Alliance like an unstoppable dark tide. "If not for me then for all the brave men and women who are giving their lives for the sake of freedom and survival. Please, I'm begging you, whoever is listening. Please show me a sign, anything to let me know that this will turn out ok."

* * *

><p>Stretching for millions of kilometers in every direction, the Covenant Armada, otherwise known as the Fleet of Righteous Indignation, was the single most powerful military force assembled by their Empire in its long history. Consisting of fifty thousand capital ships it represented every vessel not dedicated to patrolling and defending the Covenant's numerous worlds. Floating through the star-strewn void like luminous marine predators, it boasted everything from the tiny Corvettes to the awe-inspiring Supercarriers, of which there were three. Never before had three of the seven most powerful warships ever built by Covenant hands been assembled in the same place. The triumvirate consisted of the warships Long Night of Solace, Divine Fury, and the _Glorious Retribution._

Buried deep within the circular heart of the twenty-nine kilometer long _Divine Fury_ was Grel Rad'dumee, the Sangheili formerly charged with monitoring the status of the Mass Effect Universe (of which the Hierarchs were major fans) He was now charged with purging it of the evil taint of EA from the Universe with fire and fury. Resplendent in his silver Imperial Admiral's armor, he was stunned that he was even in this position. Just a month ago he was a simple Fleetmaster, now he was in charge of the single most powerful military force ever created. The thought of it was enough to make his head spin with the power he now wielded.

"Sir," A Sangheili Ultra reported from one of the massive vessel's bridge consoles. "The armada is prepared, would you care to say a few words to the fleet, sir?"

Grel nodded and opened the fleet-wide communications channel from where he stood, surrounded by glowing holographic displays. In an instant his seven-foot tall form, bedecked in sculpted silver armor with glowing gold Forerunner runes etched into it, appeared on the bridge of every warship in the armada.

"Covenant brothers, heed me! For now we are about to embark upon one of the greatest journeys of our existence! The foolish Reapers dare to stand against us, the Covenant, the unbreakable empire! Their foolishness will perish with their ships, and they shall feel the wrath of our fleets and armies! By the blood of our fathers, by the blood of our sons, we shall purge their Universe of evil with divine fire, and continue our march towards glorious salvation!"

As he finished the bridge crew roared at the top of their voices, and surrounding the massive flagship, every vessel's halls rang with the battle cries of the incensed Covenant forces. From the mighty Sangheili and Jiralhanae to the lowly Unggoy, every single Covenant soldier's bloodlust was aroused and inflaming their minds.

With that, Grel triggered the specific jump coordinates. The Forerunner cross-dimensional slipspace drives, recently discovered and painstakingly installed on all fifty thousand warships, activated. The space around the armada seemed to rip itself apart in a violent white flash of energy. The local space-time fabric actually began unraveling with the sheer number of ships slipping out of normal space so close together. As the final slipspace portal collapsed, it triggered an explosion on the magnitude of two supernovas, as the natural forces of the Universe sought to re-establish equilibrium. Normally a deep-space jump wouldn't do this, but this was hardly a normal jump...

* * *

><p>Darth Vader stood again on the bridge of his command ship, gazing (mostly) silently out at the swirling vortexes of energy before him. Crowding around his mammoth dreadnaught were two dozen Star Destroyers, ten of them Imperial-II Class, fourteen of them Victory-II Class, as well as two fighter-carriers, twenty Lancer-Class Frigates, and a dozen fleet tenders and resupply craft. They had no idea how long they'd be in the alternate Universe, so they were bringing plenty of supplies to keep the notoriously temperamental capital ships in working order.<p>

Vader was in a foul mood, even more so than usual. For one thing they were deep within the Kessel system, hovering near the edge of the Maw, a collection of massive black holes. According to his master, this was the portal to the other Universes. When he pressed his master if he was sure about his deduction, he'd replied.

"Not at all, my Apprentice, but we use this damn place as a dumping ground for all our Deus Ex Machinas and plot devices, so why the hell not?"

He hadn't been that reassured to hear that, and he was even more

pissed off when the Emperor called Grand Admiral Thrawn back from the Unknown Regions to lead the assault, usurping his command of the _Executor_. Worse, he was told he wasn't allowed to strangle people anymore! Apparently they were down on recruiting quotas this year, and they had identified that Vader's killing of his subordinates was one of the primary causes. Thus he was forbidden from strangling anyone by direct order of the Emperor.

As such he was in an extremely foul mood and was unable to vent his frustrations by killing a junior officer. A blue skinned alien with jet-black hair and glowing red eyes walked up next to him. He appeared to be human except for these two differences, and he was dressed in an immaculate white and gold Grand Admiral's uniform.

"Grand Admiral Thrawn." Vader ground out, his voice dropping a couple octaves lower, as impossible as that sounds. "You might be in command of this mission, but this is _my_ ship."

"Certainly Lord Vader," The Chiss replied in a smooth, cultured voice. "I would never presume to intrude upon your domain. I am here at the bequest of the Emperor. Once we are finished with our business I will return to my previous mission. I do not wish to impose."

Vader only growled and stalked off the bridge, leaving the alien in command. He silently observed the swirling vortexes of the black holes.

"Sir!" A young lieutenant in the starboard crew pit called out to him. It was a mark of the rank Thrawn wore that there was no hint of disdain in his voice or a sneer on his face when he addressed the admiral. "All vessels are in position and are awaiting your orders, sir!"

Thrawn nodded and promptly responded. "Deploy the fleet. All ships jump on my mark, three, two, one, mark!"

The fleet jumped to hyperspace directly into the Maw. As the stars elongated into a glowing tunnel of light Thrawn had one thought on his mind. '_Once more unto the breach it is then. Let us cry havoc and let slip the hounds of war.'_

* * *

><p>Far from Admiral Hackett's battle group, the Asari dreadnaught Destiny Ascension burned. One of the points on the ship's cross-shaped hull had been blown off by a stray Thanix shot, tearing the hull and leaving support beams exposed. The once-gleaming metal armor was now pitted and burned, and many parts of the ship were now dark, as the ship's power grid was collapsing. All across the massive warship, rents in the armor burned bright orange, the flames fueled by leaking atmosphere. Far away, almost invisible against the black backdrop of space, two Reaper capital ships prowled, wary that their dying prey might still have some teeth, even as the glowing blue engine at the heart of the craft spluttered and misfired, pushing the hull of the massive craft against the debris of the five Reaper dreadnaughts she had already killed.

Buried at the heart of the Asari craft, the darkened bridge was

illuminated by small fires burning from burst pipes in the walls, and what few viewscreens were still operational. Sparks flew from shattered circuits, sent into overload by Reaper computer viruses before their onboard VI's could contain them. One portion of the bridge's ceiling had collapsed, the result of the ship taking a direct hit from an enemy dreadnaught's mass accelerator cannon. The shot had barely missed the bridge, blown a gaping hole through the hull, and disabled their main gun. A second shot had missed hitting the ship's superstructure, but it tore away the tattered remains of their kinetic barriers.

Matriarch Kiara, commanding officer of the Destiny Ascension got up dazedly from the hard metal floor she had fallen to after the last salvo from the Reapers. Her head was fuzzy and ringing, and a large gash on her forehead bled purple blood profusely, dripping into her eyes and burning. The room swam before her eyes, and her hearing was muted, with only muffled shouts and the sound of the emergency alarms getting through.

Focus! She thought. You have a battle to conduct! Fight your ship! She shook her head several times, and waited until the three images of the oval-shaped room realigned. She glanced around; several crews were trying to get the fires on the bridge put out, another group were frantically shouting into headsets. Most of the viewscreens in the room showed only static or blackness, with a few still online. She staggered over to where a younger Asari leaned over a damaged console.

"Report!" The Matriarch bellowed over the roar of the flames and the fire-suppression canisters the surviving bridge crewmembers were using.

"Main gun offline, ma'am." The younger alien reported grimly. "We're trying to get it back up."

On the tiny screen, repair crews were working frantically in the main battery, risking deadly radiation to bring the primary cannon back online. The room was completely open to space, and swarms of technicians crawled over the massive magnetic coils in sealed yellow hardsuits. As the two women watched, a stray piece of sparking debris struck a portion of the cannon assembly. Instantly the screen went static white and a massive shockwave ripped through the ship. The Destiny Ascension kicked sideways in space and screamed like a dying dragon as the lower half of the hull was almost completely torn off.

"Emergency." The maddeningly calm voice of the shipboard VI cut through the groans and blaring klaxons permeating the bridge. "Main cannon misfire. Shipwide cooling system compromised. Shutting down main reactor."

"B- *cough* bring the emergency H-Cells online!" The Matriarch commanded, choking on the smoke-filled air. The ensign who'd stood next to her stared at her with glassy, dead eyes. A large piece of twisted metal was sticking out of her stomach. She felt a pang of sadness, but ruthlessly quashed it; she had more urgent matters to attend to.

Somewhere nearby one of the few surviving Asari flipped a series of safety-capped switches and blue emergency lights flickered on,

illuminating the wrecked bridge. Powerful fans cleared the air of smoke, making it breathable again. Another Asari rushed over and pulled the matriarch to her feet.

"D-damage report." She commanded shakily, leaning on her subordinate heavily. One of her legs was broken, and fiery lances of pain shot up it every time she jostled it.

A holographic representation of the dreadnaught sputtered into view, and instantly turned almost completely red, indicating terminal damage across the entire ship.

"Main battery offline." Came the VI's calm-as-ever voice. "GARDIAN laser system: disabled, forward missile magazines: depleted. Kinetic barrier generators: eighty percent destroyed or inoperative. Main engines: offline, structural integrity compromised. Life support failing, fires burning on decks one through fifty-five. Suppression systems: inadequate. Primary reactor scrambled. Hull breaches on all decks. Seventy percent of crew killed or incapacitated."

A new, warbling klaxon sounded in the midst of the cacophony already playing on the bridge. "Ma'am, inbound missiles!" The sensors officer reported from across the room. On her screen, tiny glimmers appeared, rapidly streaking in from the distant Reaper ships. The undersides of the squid-like ships' 'mantles' glowed a dull purple-white; they were moving out to deal with the nearby cluster of Turian ships, not even bothering to finish the Asari off personally.

The Matriarch stared at the distant glimmers in despair. They spelled death for her and what was left of her crew. A lone tear dropped from her eye. She wished she could see her daughter one last time, or hold her lover close. Instead she and the rest of her bridge crew merely stood, tired and bleeding, as their doom crept inexorably closer.

* * *

><p>Lieutenant-Commander Joseph Stevens of the Victory-II Class Destroyer Intolerant was an oddity in many ways. For one, he did not fully buy into the Empire's general xenophobia and human-supremacy agenda. When asked about his beliefs, he simply stated that he did not have an opinion on the subject, or preferred not to talk about. Furthermore, he had joined the Imperial Navy, like a great many others, out of a genuine desire to help keep order in the galaxy. However, after seeing the atrocities that were ordered by the Emperor and carried out by the captains of Imperial Star Destroyers, he made up his mind to never be put in that position. And so he turned down promotion after promotion, which would have taken him away from his Victory-Class ship, a vessel that was largely considered obsolete in the eyes of the higher-ups in Imperial Command. (who had an unhealthy obsession with building ever-larger warships, Joseph privately suspected that they were all compensating for something)

Standing on the bridge of his warship, staring out into the blue and white oblivion of Hyperspace, Joseph sighed. This was his tenth tour of duty in his long Imperial career. He'd been from one end of the galaxy to the other, fought in countless engagements, and stopped several potentially lethal sneak attacks on every battle group he'd been assigned to. He'd watched as men he'd trained personally went on to be promoted out from under him and wound up in command of

Imperator-Class Star Destroyers, and rained hell down upon unsuspecting worlds. It made him privately sick to watch the devastation unfold whenever a ship in his battle group did such a thing, but he kept his mouth shut, toed the line, and thanked God that his ship was designed for deep-space engagements, anti-fighter, and anti-missile operations, not planetary bombardment.

"Sir!" One of his lieutenants spoke up from the portside crew pit.

"Yes?" He asked, his voice conveying none of the weariness he felt.

"We'll be reverting to realspace in two minutes, sir." The youthful officer reported.

"Very well." Stevens said quietly, turning to his bronze-haired XO standing next to him. "Sound general quarters, Lieutenant Lane."

As his second-in-command rapidly began shouting orders to the crew, Stevens stroked the grey-and-black mustache and goatee on his face, both trimmed to remain rigidly within Imperial standards. His skin was pale and covered in scars, all that remained of a horrific disease that had swept through his ship several years before, attacking and devouring human skin and muscle. He was one of the lucky few to have survived long enough to receive the vaccine, and he kept the scars as a reminder to always remain vigilant for unexpected threats.

_They'll probably offer me up another promotion when we get back from this. _He thought. _Maybe I should retire, it's been forty-five years. _His blue eyes narrowed as the counter on the screen before him approached zero.

With a flash of light, the glowing hyperspace tunnel vanished, the ship reverted to realspace-

-And all sound on the bridge was drowned out by the screaming alarms of multiple unknown warships fighting in the area. Commander Stevens only got a brief look at the planet burning in front of him and the ever-present fireballs of exploding ships and ordinance before turning and immediately issuing orders.

"Emergency evasive!" He bellowed to the helmsman. "Divert all auxiliary power to forward shields!"

The bridge erupted in what could best be described as controlled chaos as the sensors officer shouted out data to the navigator and helmsman, the defense officers began shouting out reports to one another, and the gunnery officers began shouting out potential targets and threats. In the midst of it all, Commander Stevens and Lieutenant Lane stood at the front of the bridge, hands braced against the computer consoles, and gazing intently out at the hell raging around their warship. There were no other Imperial vessels to be seen.

"-Damage report!"

"Deflector shields are up and holding at max!"

"-three contacts at medium range, twenty-five at maximum range, several thousand within total scanning capability!"

"Captain!" The sensors officer shouted, getting his attention. "I'm not seeing any other Imperial ships nearby!"

"Affirmative, sir!" The navigator joined in from near the sensors officer. "We are out of position, I repeat, we are out of position!"

Thinking fast, trying to prioritize things, Stevens began issuing orders. "Kill the alarms! Comms, get me patched through to the _Executor, _sensors; search for targets matching those in our mission briefing, I want to know what's hostile, what's Imperial, and what's left over out there! Helm, move us into a higher orbit."

"Sir, I can't raise Admiral Thrawn, there's too much interference!" The comms officer shouted from his station. "All channels are completely jammed!"

"Sir! Two Reaper dreadnaughts, four hundred thousand clicks off of starboard bow, sir!" The sensors group yelled out. "Sir, there's a damaged ship, two hundred thousand clicks away, off the port bow... Sir, the Reapers have launched missiles at them, impact in fifteen minutes!"

Stevens' eyes narrowed, and he tapped a control on the console in front of him. A section of the window in front of him distorted, magnifying the view of the distant ship. It was a pitiful sight, what was clearly once a proud warship the size of an Emperor-II Class Star Destroyer was now a twisted, blackened hulk, one end of it had been almost completely torn off, massive gouges and holes dotted its curving hull, and it was slowly tumbling in space, clearly without power.

"Sensors." He said harshly. "Is there anyone left alive on that ship?"

"Scanning, sir." The man acknowledged, furrowing his brow and staring intently at his small screen. "There are roughly one thousand lifeforms left onboard. There's a lot of ambient interference, but I think they're humanoid, sir."

Stevens stared hard out the window. He, like the rest of his crew, had been highly skeptical that this half-assed mission from the Emperor would actually work, but against all odds it had. Their orders had been to move in and secure humanity's homeworld (in a small corner in the back of his mind he _still_ couldn't believe that that smoldering rock ball below was the cradle of the human species) and coordinate with the local human forces to fight off the Reapers. Left unsaid was the implication that they should let any and all inhuman forces die, as long as humans weren't endangered by such actions.

Staring out at the stricken Asari dreadnaught, he knew that as per his orders, he should break off engagement and locate and rejoin the fleet. But something stopped him from giving the order to withdraw. Although he didn't know it, in this universe, away from the Emperor's Force-dominance and permanent battle-meld, his thoughts were finally clear and fully his own, and seeing these aliens, under no real

obligation to do so, fighting to the bitter end to liberate Earth, caused him to have a sudden change of heart.

"Helm, give me all ahead, full." He ordered quickly, hoping the tone of his voice wouldn't brook any argument. "Guns, once we're in range, target those missiles with forward lasers and interceptors. Don't let a single one get through. Comms, raise that damaged ship if possible, and tell them we're on their side. And prepare all five shuttles for evac and search and rescue. And tell the crews to treat them with respect, after all, we're all soldiers fighting on the same side."

It was a credit to the crew's Imperial training that not one of them questioned the order; they merely worked their controls diligently and spoke quietly into communicators. A few seconds later a low hum pervaded the entire ship as the engines came on, pushing them at breakneck pace towards the distant battlefield.

"Sir," Lieutenant Lane said in a low, quiet voice from next to him at the fore end of the bridge. "Are you really going to put our ship on the line to protect a bunch of aliens?" Stevens sighed, and answered in an undertone as well.

"Yes, I am. Lieutenant, we're out of contact with the rest of the fleet. I don't know if they're out of range or if we're the only ones who made it." Lane took a sharp breath as he realized the full impact of the situation. "In either case, it's irrelevant; we're the only Imperial forces here and we're trapped in the middle of a warzone. We'll need all the help we can get, and a thousand more soldiers is a thousand more towards winning the war, I don't care if they're aliens. Besides, saving a helpless, crippled ship might buy us some trust from the other factions fighting the Reapers out there. And we'll need all the help we can get."

"I can't fault your logic." Lieutenant Lane said, gazing out of the window at the rapidly growing wreckage of the Destiny Ascension. "I just hope you know what you're getting into."

'_Yeah, me too.' _Commander Stevens thought, as the helm officer announced that they were seven minutes from intercept range.

* * *

><p>Aboard the dying Asari flagship, Matriarch Kiara watched as the missiles drew closer. It had been almost ten minutes, and she felt oddly calm. Knowing the exact time to your death wasn't as terrifying as some would imagine it to be, it was actually kind of soothing. She and her surviving crew spent their last few minutes in prayer, asking the goddess to watch over their fallen crewmembers and take them into her arms when their own fate arrived. As they recited the last syllable of the ancient prayer, Matriarch Kiara stood and glanced at the missiles through one of the few functioning sensor clusters left on the outer hull.<p>

"Won't be long now." She muttered to herself, wondering if death would be painless.

Then, suddenly, a flash of green light intersected one of the missiles, detonating it. Then another, and another. A second later it seemed like an entire sheet of green fire was pouring into the

incoming missiles from just out of frame. Stunned, the nine hundred year old Asari panned the camera over to the source of the mysterious green shots, and felt her heart soar as hope flooded her.

A strange, triangular ship, its aft end glowing with blue fire, sped towards her stricken vessel. From its pointed bow wave after wave of green projectiles erupted, speeding through space to destroy the Reaper missiles. The warheads took evasive maneuvers, spiraling in intricate patterns in an effort to evade destruction, but a glowing green bolt of energy intercepted each one. No missiles made it through the curtain of defensive fire; the gunners onboard this new warship seemed determined to keep the enemy at bay.

Her radio crackled, and a clipped, male human voice emerged from it. "This is the _Intolerant_, a Victory-II Class Star Destroyer to stricken vessel. We are standing by to evacuate any surviving crew and are not hostile. Please acknowledge if you are able to. Medical teams are on standby. I repeat..."

Matriarch Kiara grabbed at the nearest headset, frantic with relief. Maybe they would survive this after all! But what in the name of the goddess was a Victory-II Class Star Destroyer? "Hello? This is Matriarch Kiara, commander of the _Destiny Ascension_. Thank you from the bottom of our hearts, _Intolerant_. We require immediate medical assistance for several of our crew and request immediate evacuation."

There was a slight delay, before: "Roger, _Destiny Ascension_. Evacuation shuttles are inbound. Be advised, we cannot take very many individuals at one time, but we'll do our best to get your crew off safely." Kiara breathed a sigh of relief as the bridge crew cheered. _By the goddess, they were going to be ok! _Then she saw the two Reaper dreadnaughts turn faster than she would have thought possible, and raced to intercept the destroyer that had come to their rescue.

* * *

><p>As the last of the missiles exploded under concentrated laser fire, Commander Stevens smiled slightly. Meanwhile, nearby the comms officer reported making successful, peaceful contact with the survivors of the crippled warship, apparently called the Destiny Ascension, and had dispatched shuttles for evacuation. Now he could only hope that none of the rescue crews would cause an incident through bigotry.

Little did he know, that with the pall of the Emperor's Dark Side powers removed from their minds, the Imperials' xenophobia was fading away and soon would be but an unpleasant memory.

"Sir!" The sensors officer reported. "Those two Reaper ships are coming about and are on an intercept course!" He paused, staring hard at the screen, before adding. "Incoming fighters, at least one squadron!"

"Launch both squadrons of TIEs." Stevens ordered, nodding at the starfighter coordination officer. He remembered the briefing mentioning the Reaper fighters being some things called 'Occuli', and being heavily armored yet highly maneuverable. "Standard picket screen. Helm, move us into a defensive position between the

_Ascension _and the Reapers, don't let them get a shot off."

"Yes sir." The officers replied. "Both squadrons launched," The starfighter commander reported a few seconds later. "And all five shuttles are en route to the _Ascension_."

"Additional missiles sir!" The sensors officer shouted. "They're locked onto us! Range two thousand kilometers, closing fast."

"Open fire!" Stevens shouted, hardly letting the other officer finish. Streaks of green light leapt from the forward laser cannons on the bow, the bolts of energy hitting the missiles and causing them to flash into little points of light and shrapnel.

Meanwhile the TIE squadron collided with the Occulus squadron a good distance off of the destroyer's bow and opened fire. Their twin lasers burning through the enemy fighters' armor and melting delicate electronics. As the Imperial ships blew through the screen of incoming fighters, they left several bits of trailing debris in their wake. The Reaper ships were no slouches either, and red laser beams flashed through the void, detonating any fighters unlucky enough to get caught by them. In a few short moments the space between the two ships was filled with flashes of light and free-floating wreckage. The TIE fighters might have had the advantage of two-on-one odds, but the Reaper ships were tearing through them like tissue paper, proving that quality trumps quantity.

"Sir, we've lost sixty percent of our fighters, and the enemy hasn't even lost ten percent!" The starfighter coordination officer reported a few minutes later on the bridge of the _Intolerant_.

'_Dammit.' _Stevens thought.

"Call them back, and open up on the Reaper fighters with our forward ion cannons. Let's see how they like that."

The few surviving TIEs frantically broke off from the Reaper fighters and fled back to the protection of their mothership. The Occuli turned to pursue them, and were caught by blue bolts of energy fired from special ports on the _Intolerant_'s hull. They bypassed their armor plating and completely slagged their guidance computers, rendering them useless hunks of metal left drifting in space.

"Good shot gunny." Stevens complimented his officer with a smile, before turning his gaze back out the main window to stare at the rapidly growing dark blurs of the Reaper ships. "Target the nearest Reaper and give him a full salvo of turbolaser fire and six proton torpedoes." He ordered in a harsh tone, eager to avenge the loss of the TIE squadron.

On the outer hull of the ship, massive blocky gun turrets rotated into position and locked onto the approaching Reaper ships, before firing massive green blasts of directed energy at them. Bright blue missiles streaked from special launchers ensconced deep in the bow of the destroyer and arced towards the squid-like ships.

The bright bolts of energy bypassed the Reaper's barriers entirely, and slammed at full force into the thing's forward hull, causing it to erupt in bright flashes of fire. On the bridge of the Imperial ship the crew cheered, before quickly gasping in shock as the light

faded, revealing the slightly scarred, but otherwise undamaged Reaper bow. Meanwhile the proton torpedoes impacted against the massive warship's kinetic barriers, and detonated. Some of the energy and radiation made it through the shields, but most of it was shunted aside by the oscillating kinetic barriers.

The shock slowed Stevens down for less than a second before he began shouting commands again.

"Reload the forward tubes and fire turbolasers again!" He ordered as the nearest Reaper began raising a single arm in their direction.

"Turbolaser capacitors are drained, sir!" The gunnery officer reported grimly. "They're down and charging, ten seconds!"

Stevens watched as the end of the Reaper appendage began glowing an ominous red. "Oh, shit. BRACE FOR IMPACT!"

A bright red shot fired from the Reaper and hit the bow of his vessel, splattering against the forward shields. The _Intolerant_ shuddered and rattled under the impact and the lights dimmed slightly as power was shunted to reinforce the forward shields.

"Damage report!" The commander bellowed, swaying on his feet as the ship rocked from the attack. The viewport polarized to pitch black to block the harmful light from the detonation, and it also blocked his view of the area.

"Forward shields are holding at thirty percent, sir!" The defense officer reported, shock evident in his voice. "Their weapons are powerful, sir, we can't take another hit like that!"

"Turbolaser batteries are recharged and torpedo tubes are reloaded, sir!" The gunnery officer shouted from his station.

"Fire everything at them, then immediately rotate and present our ventral shields to the Reapers. Shunt all power to reinforcing the shields and recharging the turbolasers. As soon as they're recharged, rotate to firing position and hit them with everything we've got again!" He shouted, trying not to let the panic seep into his voice.

"Yes sir!"

The ship shuddered as another wave of missiles and laser energy flashed at the Reaper dreadnaught. He watched as the starfield outside the bridge window turned ponderously slow, too slowly. He watched as the laser blasts impacted the nose of the Reaper, and as explosions played out across the hull. Was that? It was! A large secondary explosion detonated on the starboard side of the Reaper, kicking it sideways a little. The proton torpedoes turned to follow. The first few slammed into the shields, but the fourth detonation broke through, washing the face of the Reaper in burning blue fire. The fifth and sixth shots flew through where the massive ship's kinetic barriers used to be and their combined blasts vaporized the front end of the dreadnaught, sending it into a tumble as the dying cyborg spasmed.

Commander Stevens grinned ferally at the sight, but it slipped from

his face as the second Reaper plowed through the cloud of debris left by its dead fellow. Looking for all the world like some monster come straight out of hell, the Reaper's front end glowed, and a massive beam attack shot out at the _Intolerant_ just as the edge of the vessel's triangular hull rotated to block it from view. The destroyer surged and bucked, and warning klaxons blared across the bridge. Stevens' heart sank as he recognized the sounds. _Hull breach and lethal radiation._

"Sitrep, now!" He shouted, picking himself up from where he'd fallen to the deck.

"Forward bow's been almost completely destroyed!" Someone shouted back to him. "Ventral shields collapsing!"

"Helm, full rotation, now!" Stevens bellowed, his uniform askew. "Show 'em our teeth. Gunny, I don't care how you do it, dump every last amp into the cannon capacitors, and fire until the barrels melt!"

The ship shuddered, the artificial gravity oscillating as the big ship turned more ponderously than before. The _Intolerant_ rang like a gong as hit after hit from the Reaper's mass accelerator cannon hammered into the ventral hull plating. "Come on, you big bitch, come _on_!" Stevens growled under his breath, staring out at the mangled, melted bow as the Reaper gradually came back into view. "Fire!" He practically screamed the word as the main body came within the turbolaser targeting arc.

The ship actually shuddered, not from the impact of a round, but from the simultaneous firing of every heavy weapon on the ship. A sheet of green and blue fire flew off of the front of the destroyer, coating the Reaper in a layer of energy as the cannons fired again and again, the barrels transcending the spectrum from dull red to orange to bright, intense white in a matter of minutes. Eventually the automatic safety shutdown cut in to prevent permanent damage to the weapons systems, and silence -save for a few distant alarms- reigned on the bridge.

The Reaper, its hull glowing a bright red from the absorbed energy, was pitted and cratered, showing no signs of life. It floated, dead in space, a little off the destroyer's bow. Commander Stevens stared hard for a moment at the floating, half-melted hulk, and sighed, straightening his tunic.

"Well, the day is ours, well done gentle-" He stopped in mid-sentence as the Reaper ship's lights flared to life and it pointed a glowing red appendage right at the bridge, and _him._

"That's just not fair." He said in a very quiet voice, preparing for the end.

* * *

><p>Ended here. Until next time, Muwahahaha!<p>

Thanks to anyone who read this far, and don't worry, there's a lot more carnage where this came from. This was also a lot more serious than the last chapter, but what can you expect? It's war. I hope y'all like it anyways.

5. Chapter 5

Alrighty, so, with me running on a couple of gallons of caffeine, I proudly present the continuing saga of 'Screw This, I'm Firing the Halo Array'. In our last segment, a few of the participants of the final battle arrived, an Imperial Victory-II Class Star Destroyer got pummeled, and the entire Reaper armada is on its way to Earth.

What will happen next? Who will survive? Who else will join in on this insanity? Seriously, why am I asking you all this? I'm the author!

* * *

><p>Chapter 5 â€" The Ultimate Showdown Part 3:
Alliance

* * *

><p>Deep under the Atlantic Ocean, in a long-forgotten dystopian nightmare of a city, a heavily built man in a simple sweater and jeans crouched alone in the darkness. Surrounded by damp rock walls and crates marked 'Fontaine Fisheries', he stared silently at the small, pink, glowing syringe in his hands.<p>

Atlas, the man who'd been helping him ever since he'd arrived in this underwater hellhole, had asked him to go to another Universe and help turn the tide against something called 'Reapers'. He wasn't too sure about it, but it was the least he could do for Atlas. He'd helped him so much since he'd been here, giving him his first plasmid, saving his life, providing useful instructions. And the man had just lost his wife and son.

Besides, Atlas had asked so politely, who was he to refuse?

Checking for the last time that everything was in place â€"backpack full of weapons, med kits, and ammunition, pistol tucked into his belt, bandolier of EVE hypos secure- and heaved the heavy pack onto his shoulders. He'd always been strong, it came from working on a farm all his life, and the strength-enhancing plasmids made it all the easier to carry everything.

The man slowly and deliberately took the hypo â€"provided by Atlas through a mail-tube- jammed it into his left wrist, just above the tattoos of chains, and injected the contents into a vein.

For a brief moment, he watched as the pink fluid raced through his veins and up his arm; permeating every cell in his body. Then, in a blinding flash of light, the modified teleportation plasmid whisked him away from the crumbling city of Rapture.

* * *

><p>A Universe away, a horde of iridescent, purple warships glided swiftly through space. Numbering in the hundreds of thousands, their combing mass was enough to perturb the orbit of the large, beautiful ringed world they were passing on their way to Earth. Harbinger had summoned them after the combined galactic forces had smashed a hole

in their lines and landed troops on Earth.<p>

Things were not going as planned, and as they hurtled through space warnings began flooding in, reports of strange warships, unexplained phenomenon occurring around Earth, and most worrisome, multiple Reaper casualties. It wasn't unheard of for some of the organics of each cycle to get lucky and kill a few Reaper capital ships; they weren't invincible after all, however this cycle had inflicted disproportionate casualties on the invading forces. Far more Reapers had fallen in this cycle than any one before, and the Reapers had already suffered a net loss in ships. Even if they harvested every single spacefaring species this cycle, it still wouldn't recoup even half of their losses.

Things were definitely not going as planned. And to make matters worse, the organics had somehow managed to complete their superweapon, dubbed 'the Crucible' by the humans. No cycle had ever managed to deploy, or even complete the device before, and that was something that concerned the Reapers greatly, especially with this sudden assault on Earth, and more importantly: the Citadel. The AI known as the Catalyst could only conclude that the organics knew of the Citadel's role in conjunction with the Crucible, and that they were at Earth to try and use it.

Was it afraid? No, the super-intelligence spread throughout the Reaper armada assured itself. It did not feel fear, or any emotion. It merely acknowledged a significant threat to its continued survival and the success of this harvest, and allocated resources accordingly.

The fact that those resources represented the bulk of the Reaper fleet was ignored by the intellect. It was only prudent, after all, to ensure that there was no margin for error in this, the most important battle of the cycle.

Sill, as the ancient, enigmatic AI peered out from the millions of sensors scattered across the myriad Reapers that formed its 'body' at the hell raging above humanity's homeworld, a portion of its runtimes diverted to calculate whether or not it could force the reinforcements' engines to increase in speed.

Unnoticed by the Reapers or their beleaguered enemies fighting in the vicinity of Earth, something strange was happening around the fifth planet, Jupiter. Had any of the Reapers, or even organic scientists been available to observe the phenomenon, the readings coming from the Jovian system would have stunned and baffled them. Gravity, indeed, the very fabric of space-time was distorting, threatening to unravel. It was as if some great, unseen force was straining against the bonds of this reality, threatening to tear it entirely. The Reapers on their way sunward might have noticed, had they been looking. But at present they were too focused on the battle raging around the Citadel to notice, despite the fact that Jupiter lay almost directly in their path.

The space near the Jovian system began rippling like the air over a blacktop on a hot summer's day.

* * *

><p>"All set Harry?" The Weasley twins asked as one, walking through

a heavy iron door flanked by torches.<p>

The teenaged wizard looked up from the stone bench he'd been sitting on for half an hour in the darkened underbelly of the Ministry and nodded.

They'd arrived in the Department of Mysteries a while ago, and he had been outfitted with everything they thought they'd need for a trip to an alternate Universe. He was clad from head-to-foot in thick, dragonhide armor, which one of the twins had assured him had cost a small fortune. His glasses had been taken and replaced with a special set of goggles, enchanted to be unbreakable and self-correcting; along with some other functions the twins would explain as needed.

Harry had been apprehensive about returning to the site of Sirius' death, and the twins had been sympathetic. They very pointedly avoided bringing the subject up, and had hurried him through the spinning room without a word.

As Harry entered the low-slung barracks, and after his dizziness had passed, he was shocked by how many gray-clad Unspeakables were in the room. There had to be at least three dozen, with others flitting in and out of the long, dimly-illuminated room through side entrances. All of them were wearing long, gray cloaks, with the hoods up. There had to be some sort of charm on them, because the witches' and wizards' faces were always shrouded in darkness, even when standing next to the few torches in the room. As they walked through the department, with both twins keeping a firm, one-handed grip on his shoulders, Harry noticed that they were the only ones there not wearing hoods.

When asked about this, George (or was it Fred?) nodded grimly and answered. "Yeah, normally no one has their hoods up like that, but because you're here... we're not allowed to compromise the identities of our agents."

"Whenever we have unsecured personnel within the department we wear the hoods." The other finished. "By the way, when we get back you'll have to take an oath of silence to not reveal our identities."

Harry frowned. "But, lots of people know who the Unspeakables are, your dad knew about those two blokes, I forget their names."

"Well," Fred began, seeming to choose his words carefully as the two of them steered Harry towards the other end of the room, the crowd giving them a wide berth. "There are the agents which the rest of the Ministry knows about--"

"--And then there are others, who no one outside the Department knows about. And let's leave it at that." George said with a chilling note or seriousness. "This isn't a game, Harry. I can't even say what I really want to because of my loyalty oaths."

"Right, just know that right now, you're both perfectly safe,"

"And in the company of some of the most dangerous and dedicated witches and wizards in Britain."

"And before you ask, your little stunt last year would never have

worked had Rockwood not drawn off the defenses and opened the way for you." One of the twins answered as they came to a door and walked into a long hallway lined with even more doors. _How big _is _this place?_ Harry thought, otherwise hanging on to the twins' every word.

"Stupid blighter," The other added, his voice dripping with contempt. "At least..." He sighed. "Damn, can't say it. What I can say is that You-Know-Who is definitely down one Death Eater, one way or another."

And with that, they ushered him into a small room off to the right of the hall, and closed the door, leaving him alone. Shortly afterward he'd jumped up from the bench as the door opened and a cloaked Unspeakable walked in. Harry started to ask what was happening, but was silenced with a swish of the person's wand. He couldn't even tell if they were a witch or a wizard. After dealing with the distraction, the Unspeakable pulled out some measuring tape and precisely measured every conceivable length along Harry's body. (He was especially embarrassed when the magical measuring tape tried to wiggle up his trouser leg. Luckily the Unspeakable had stopped it before anything further happened.) They then waved their wand over Harry's head a few times, taking note of the several glowing symbols that appeared in mid-air in it wake.

They then left, only to return fifteen minutes later with a full set of dragonhide armor, complete with integral wand holsters on each wrist, one of which already had a spare wand in it. After the Unspeakable left and he'd managed to slip the surprisingly heavy armor on, he'd tested the other wand. It wasn't a perfect match; it felt... like the hand he was holding it in had fallen partially to sleep when he used it. However, he could still use it almost as effectively as his holly wand, and after casting a few simple spells he returned it to the holster on his left wrist.

Then he sat down and waited, until finally Fred and George came and got him. Now they, similarly clad in bulky dragonhide, frog-marched him through a dizzying maze of corridors, until finally they arrived in a large room, with multiple support columns stretching up to fuse seamlessly with a domed ceiling, high overhead, dimly illuminated by glowing gold globes set in the walls. There was an odd mathematical precision to the circular room's construction, however this wasn't what caught Harry's eye when they entered; it was the runes.

Even though he'd never taken Ancient Runes at Hogwarts, he knew that the ones that covered this room must be pretty important. (In a distant corner of his mind, he imagined that Hermione would kill to be in his place at the moment.) The entire room, every available surface was covered in runes and other, stranger designs. Each one had been chiseled into the living rock and then inlaid with gold and silver. The array of symbols was dizzying, and oddly it gave Harry a sense of vertigo to stare at them for too long.

He didn't have long to consider this, though, as the twins quickly led him to the center of the chamber, where professor Dumbledore and a small group of anonymous Unspeakables stood waiting.

"Harry, my boy, I trust you are doing well?" Dumbledore beamed at his protégé. The old headmaster had forsaken his usual bright, ornate robes for simple white ones.

"A little nervous, sir." Harry answered truthfully, looking around at everyone. "Is it just the twins and I going?"

"Yes, Harry. Unfortunately it's too difficult to send more than three people at a time, and I have to remain here to help power the chamber." Dumbledore replied sadly. "However, mister Weasley and mister Weasley both have my complete trust. They are very competent and dedicated individuals... when they put their minds to it that is."

"Not to worry Headmaster," One said seriously.

"We'll keep him safe." The other finished, a hard look on his face.

"Very well then." The old wizard waved his wand and three large rucksacks floated over to them. "These have been charmed with an infinite expansion spell," He explained. "We've filled them with every healing potion we could think of and a multitude of devices that might be useful for this venture, as well as ever-full water bottles and food containers. Oh, and one more thing."

He waved his wand again, and Harry's vision blurred before coming back into focus. He shook his head as if to clear it, and realized that Dumbledore had cast bubblehead charms on the three of them. "That ought to do it." Then, the old man stepped forward and wrapped Harry in a hug. "Goodbye, Harry, and good luck." He said quietly, stepping back from him. "I wish you didn't have to go, but the prophecy says that it is you who must have the power, not anyone else. Stay safe my boy."

With that, Dumbledore and the others spread out along the sides of the room, leaving the trio standing alone in the center of the circle. Fred and George flanked him, one hand clutching their wands, the others on Harry's shoulders. Harry resisted the urge to pull out his wand; he was so nervous he was worried about accidentally casting magic and doing something to interfere with the process.

As one, the assembled witches and wizards began chanting in a low undertone. Harry didn't understand the words or the language, but noticed that as they continued to say the spell, the runes nearest each person began glowing with a dim light, and that glow seemed to spread out through the runes in every direction from them. His eyes went wide as the glow reached the runes beneath his feet, and he let out a shuddering breath when nothing happened. Then the glowing runes began getting brighter, slowly at first, but picking up speed as the chanting of those assembled increased in tempo. In a few seconds Harry couldn't make out individual syllables much less any words from the chant as the glow intensified to near blinding levels. Harry squeezed his eyes shut behind the goggles, and gasped as he felt a swooping sensation grow in his stomach. He felt as if he was as light as air. Meanwhile, Fred and George's grips on his shoulders tightened so as to be slightly painful, even through the padded armor.

Still the chanting increased in speed, until all the sounds blurred together into a harmonious song that didn't even sound like it was coming from human voices. It actually reminded him of phoenix song, although it was slightly different and didn't bring a feeling of courage. As the song began to build in volume, the swooping sensation

increased and a tingling numbness swept through Harry's body. He cracked open an eye and gasped at what he saw.

The runes covering the room had brightened to shine with the force of a noonday sun, and had his goggles not polarized to block out the light, he felt he would have gone blind from the light. However, the truly frightening thing was that the three of them were floating nearly fifty feet in the air, near the exact center of the chamber.

Suddenly, the song-like chant's volume swelled to unprecedented levels, and for a very brief instant, Harry felt as if he was being compressed down to the size of a tiny marble. He tried to scream, but his vision flashed white, and with a thundering crack, the three wizards vanished.

* * *

><p>Commander Stevens stared as the red glow intensified beyond the viewport, determined to meet death with his eyes open. Everything seemed to move in slow motion as the edges of his vision became blurry, his heart thudded in his chest, the shouting of his bridge crew fell away, as he stared at death calmly-<p>

-And then three massive blasts of raging red-orange energy slammed into the side of the Reaper, blasting massive glowing craters out of its body and killing it instantly. The Thanix cannon discharged in the Reaper's death throes, but the force of the detonations disrupted its aim, and the ruby-red stream of molten metal shot off into empty space over the destroyer's bridge.

Stevens let out a breath he hadn't realized he'd been holding, and grasped the console in front of him to steady himself against his suddenly weak legs. All around him his bridge crew erupted in cheering as they realized that somehow, miraculously, they'd survived. Stevens took a moment to stare down at his white-knuckled hands, and then straightened himself, trying to shake off the residual fear and tension.

"Settle down, people." He ordered, his own voice a little unsteady. "We're still in a danger zone, so stay alert. Sensors, who shot that Reaper, and where are they?"

"Working on it sir," The ensign replied from one of the crew pits. "Our sensors are almost blind, we've taken a real pounding. But there aren't any Reapers in the immediate vicinity."

"Right, damage report!" The CO barked, wincing as he stared out at the twisted, blackened remains of the forward bow. The heavy armor plating had put up a valiant fight, but the close-range shot from the dreadnaught had cut through it like a hot knife through butter.

"Not as bad as it could have been sir, but still pretty bad." The damage control officer responded. "Most of the forward bow's been obliterated, including the launch tubes. Wait. Check that," The white-haired officer stared at his readouts. "According to sensors, starboard missile tubes four and five are blocked, but still operational. I'll get damage control teams working to clear them. Luckily the shots didn't set off the forward missile magazines, otherwise the ship would've been blown in half."

Commander Stevens nodded. "Some good news then, have crews move any functioning missiles to the starboard magazines, they aren't doing any good sitting behind destroyed tubes."

The junior officer grimaced. "Yes sir, but the corridors down there are a mess, I'm not sure if any pathways through that section of the ship are still in one piece, and a good portion of it is open to the vacuum. Additionally," He paused, steadying himself. "We suffered over three hundred casualties from the blast alone, and there are radiation alarms going off like crazy throughout the ship. And some of those cannon shots buckled our ventral plating; we're venting atmosphere in dozens of places, and one of the shots tore through the main hanger bay."

Stevens' blood ran cold as he realized the implications. "Did it--"

"No, sir. The hypermatter tanks are intact. However, it almost punched straight through the ship, and it took out the main barracks. Casualty lists are still coming in, but I don't think more than a few dozen of our onboard stormtrooper compliment survived, much less any of our ground vehicles." He paused. "We still have propulsion and life support. However, the power grid is fluctuating, and apparently--" He stopped, and the blood drained from his face.

"Lieutenant?" The Commander prompted, turning to stare at him.

"Sir, apparently many of our turbolaser control circuits burned out during the fighting. The heat wrecked them, and it'll take time to get crews in to fix them."

"Sir!" The defense officer shouted from the other side of the bridge. "I can't get our shields back up, the capacitors aren't charging!"

"Engineering!" Stevens shouted in alarm. Without shields, and with their heavy guns offline, the star destroyer was a huge sitting Bantha.

"Trying, sir!" The ensign shouted back, rapidly tapping controls on his console. Stevens glanced out the window again. The star destroyer was slowly turning above the burning planet below. The sun was just cresting the horizon, bathing the ship in a bright white light, and scattering off the floating debris from his ship and the two Reaper corpses. He watched in silent horror as various running lights along the length of the ship flickered on and off, unsteady and weak. He quickly swept his gaze through the space surrounding Earth. The commander could see distant flashes and explosions, and large blobs representing capital ships, but nothing that was too close for comfort. Yet. Unfortunately, he still couldn't see where the shots that had killed the Reaper had come from.

He turned back to the crew pit, where the engineering officer was alternating between furiously tapping controls on his console, and barking orders to the defense officer nearby. "Ensign, where are my dammed shields?!"

"We can't get power sir!" One of them responded, slamming his hands

down on the console in frustration. Stevens turned and slammed a finger down on a communications switch.

"Engine room, what the hell's going on down there!"

"We're just barely hanging on, sir." Came the static-filled reply. "The main power grid's shorting out."

"Switch in backup circuits and activate the auxiliary reactor!" The commander ordered.

"We did, sir. Otherwise we'd be dead in space! We need time to make repairs!"

"Do we have propulsion?" Stevens asked worriedly, glancing out the window again. Some of the large, purple blobs looked bigger now than they had a few minutes ago.

"I wouldn't risk it, sir." The officer at the other end of the line replied. "If we lose power to the containment shields during flight we could incinerate the ship."

The Reaper warships were definitely getting closer now, and the Intolerant was in no position to stop them. "Listen, I don't care how you do it, but we need propulsion, shields, or both in the next few minutes or we're dead."

"No promises... sir." The connection closed.

"Damage control, do we have any torpedo tubes?" Stevens asked quietly in the silence that followed.

The lieutenant just shook his head. "Maybe the rear ones, but..."

"It's not enough." The commander finished.

"Sir, incoming transmission!" The communications officer shouted suddenly.

"From who?" Lieutenant Lane asked from his position near the back of the bridge. Stevens stiffened; he'd forgotten that the other man was there in the heat of the battle.

"...Unknown source, sir." The officer replied slowly, staring hard at his screen.

Commander Stevens slowly straightened his uniform, nodded at his XO to join him at the front of the bridge, assumed the position of parade rest, and ordered. "Patch it through."

The air in front of the senior officers flickered blue in distortion for a few moments as the hologram projectors came online before resolving itself into the image of a large, muscular man, wearing a stained white t-shirt, bulky cargo pants with combat boots, and a worn gunbelt and bandolier. He had fairly short black hair slightly shot through with gray, and a full beard. Numerous tattoos covered his exposed forearms and biceps, and he held a smoking death stick in one gloved hand.

The very large man, who stood head-and-shoulders above Commander Stevens, and he wasn't exactly short, spoke with one of the most heavily accented voices anyone on the bridge had ever heard.

"Howdy folks, don't really know who y'all are, or what's going on, but I do know that you're human and trying to protect that other ship, and those big bastards, the Reapers, are slaughtering everyone else." He took a long drag from his death stick. "The name's James Raynor, and me and my boys are here to help."

* * *

><p>On the ornate bridge of the Behemoth-Class Battlecruiser Hyperion, James Raynor stared at the two holographic men visible over the main console. All around him the bridge crew, strapped into their chairs securely via restraint harnesses, spoke softly to one another and their headsets, issuing orders from the rebel flagship to the other one hundred vessels in his little flotilla.

They'd arrived just over half an hour ago and were immediately set upon by what appeared to be large, metallic purple squid. Without thinking, he'd ordered each and every Battlecruiser in the area to fire their Yamato Cannons at them, utterly vaporizing the attackers. Later, his communications officer had learned, by listening to garbled radio transmissions, that those big warships were called 'Reapers', not to be confused with the fast-attack infantry his forces employed, and they were fighting something called 'The Alliance', who were losing, badly. Raynor had been even more shocked to learn that the planet they were orbiting was Earth. The Earth. He didn't remember much from his history classes, but he had fought with the UED in the Brood Wars a few years ago, and he was pretty sure Earth wasn't supposed to be like this. The UED had warships of comparable strength to his own, surely they wouldn't lose to these Reaper things this easily!

Then he remembered Zeratul's frenzied transmission about a dimensional experiment before whatever had transported him here. He didn't put much stock into those crazy sci-fi stories about alternate universes and whatnot, but the evidence was out there, staring him in the face.

He hadn't heard from Zeratul or any of the Protoss warships that had been in orbit over the planet either...

His fleet had skirted the edge of the fighting, watching and gathering intel on the massive battle raging all around them, until they had happened across a lone, heavily-damaged triangular-shaped warship making a last stand against a Reaper dreadnaught while defending a wrecked Alliance ship. In a snap decision Raynor had ordered the forward three Battlecruisers to destroy the encroaching Reaper ship. They'd stayed out of the fight long enough, in his opinion, and if those folks were willing to die for another ship, then they couldn't be that bad. They'd been trying to contact them ever since, although communications were difficult with all the jamming and interference.

And now here he was, talking with the commanding officer of that ship, and keeping a wary eye on the threat display. There weren't any Reaper ships close by, but a few of them were edging closer, sniffing

around carefully beyond the edge of their effective weapons range.

"-Me and my boys are here to help." He finished saying to them, noting how uncomfortably similar both men's uniforms were to the UED uniforms he'd grown to hate during the Brood War.

The older looking officer sighed in obvious relief. "Captain Raynor, you have no idea how grateful we are to here that. My name is Commander Stevens, and this is my XO, lieutenant Lane. On behalf of the crew of the _Intolerant_, we thank you from the bottom of our hearts."

"No trouble at all," Raynor replied, taking in a lungful of smoke and letting it out slowly. "And it's Commander Raynor, by the way. I've never been one to sit by and let innocent people get killed, and you folks seem to be a fairly decent sort." True, they did seem incredibly rigid; probably career military, and they did look uptight. But to Jim, actions spoke louder than words, and defending a dying ship with their lives told him that they were probably men of integrity... Or batshit insane.

"Thank you then, Commander. By chance, have you heard from any Imperial-, er, any other vessels like ours?" Their Commander Stevens asked.

"No, can't help you there." Raynor replied. "Speaking of which, have you seen any, well, great big golden, er, delicate-looking ships? I was hoping to run into some friends of ours out here."

The two holographic men exchanged a look. "No commander, I'm afraid not. We only just arrived and tried to save this ship here. We're cut off from the rest of our force, and we don't even know if they made it through the jump with us."

"Wait a sec, you're not from around here either, are you!" The rebel leader exclaimed, for the first time really noticing the different design of the _Intolerant_. "Just what in the hell is going-"

The threat board suddenly pinged and the holographic men vanished as the screen changed to show a 3-D representation of the space around them. At the extreme edge of the sensor range, eight Reaper warships materialized, five destroyers and three dreadnaughts, and accelerated inward towards the cluster of ships at the center. Numbers popped up next to the holographic images, displaying information like speed, vectors, perceived threat levels, and other things. Then a cloud of smaller ships spread out from the bigger ones; swarms of starfighters deploying from their motherships.

"Dammit!" James swore. He'd hoped they'd have more time.

"What is it?" Stevens voice came through their connection.

"Reapers, a pretty good group of them." Was the reply.

"Commander, my ship is damaged, we have no engines or shields and minimal weapons." Commander Stevens informed him. "We're sitting Bantha out here!"

_Bantha? James wondered idly for a moment. "I gotcha, don't worry I

won't leave you out in the cold. Matt!" He shouted to his subordinate, sitting at the command console near the front of the bridge.

"Sir!"

"Order our Battlecruisers to charge their Yamato Cannons and prepare to fire on my command. Move us into a defensive line between the Reapers and the other two ships and launch all Wraiths and Vikings. Have the transport ships hang back close to the _Intolerant_ and keep the science vessels close to our capitals ships. Also..." He paused for a moment. "Send a couple of shuttles of SCVs and Medics over to the _Intolerant_ have them assist with the repairs if at all possible."

"Aye-aye, sir." The young, optimistic man replied, and began tapping controls. Seconds later there was a rumble as the massive ship's engines engaged, moving the vessel ponderously towards the encroaching Reapers.

Raynor turned to sit down at his chair, when he was distracted by the sound of the bridge door opening. He turned, and his eyes went wide. _She's supposed to be in the med-bay!_

"Jim," The soft voice of Sarah Kerrigan spoke to him, as her green eyes stared into his. "It's quiet." Then her eyes rolled up in her head, and she collapsed to the deck.

Jim Raynor took two quick strides forward, and caught her before she hit the metals plating. "Medic!" He shouted, holding her suddenly limp body in his arms.

* * *

><p>Commander Stevens watched as the massive warships glided silently past his crippled vessel. They were massive, easily one and a half times the size of an Impstar Duece, and from what little his sensors could tell him, bristling with heavy turbolaser batteries. In addition to that, the wing-like protrusions on either side of the Battlecruisers' squat bodies held heavy artillery cannons, likely for planetary bombardment. The strange thing was the glowing circular area on the hammer-shaped bow of the warships. According to the readings from his sensors, an inordinate amount of the ships' power supplies was being routed to that area, for what he had no idea.<p>

"Sir, the allied warships are launching fighters, and several large vehicles that are on an intercept course with us!" The sensors officer reported.

Commander Stevens started to react when the comms officer chimed in. "Sir, they are hailing us, apparently they're transport craft with medical personnel and mechanics and are here to help us make repairs."

Stevens sighed slightly in relief. _A noble gesture._ He thought. "XO, you have the con, I'm going below to greet our guests." Lane nodded in response.

As he walked towards the turbolift at the far end of the bridge, the

deck officer spoke up. "Sir, the first shuttles from the Ascension are entering the docking pattern, they should be in place when you get to the hangar."

The commander nodded as he stepped onto the lift.

* * *

><p>In the blackness of space, just above Jupiter's North Pole, the distortions grew ever more violent, small flashes of light could be seen among the ripples in the fabric of spacetime, accompanied by spikes of radiation.<p>

Still oblivious, the Reaper armada entered the outer reaches of the Jovian moon system, the light of the distant sun reflecting brightly off their hulls, in pale contrast to the reflected light from the salmon-colored planet to their starboard sides.

* * *

><p>Aboard the Hyperion and every other capital ship in Raynor's fleet, alerts were given, pilots scrambled into their ships' cockpits, and ordinance was loaded in the last few minutes. The Wraith space superiority fighters -made up of long thin fuselages and three burst-laser tipped wings, one below the main body and two to either side- were the first to launch. Deployed from special racks on the ceilings of the Battlecruisers' numerous launch bays, the small, somewhat fragile starfighters were violently catapulted out of the hangars through the magnetic airlocks, and into the silent void of space.

The Wraiths were shortly followed by the bigger and bulkier Viking variable-geometry assault platforms. Built as both a combat walker and an anti-capital ship aerial missile gunship, the Viking was a squat, but absurdly well-armed assault walker, boasting two massive .75 Cal Gatling cannons on either side of the heavily armored cockpit. After the Wraiths were deployed, the massive engines on the aft end of the Vikings flared to life, catapulting them off the hangar floors. Their Gatling cannons collapsed in on themselves, panels and armored plating shifted, the walker legs retracted and re-shaped themselves, and the missile pods emerged from special compartments in the rear of the ships.

Not thirty seconds after the Wraiths launched, the Viking strike force was ready to deploy, hovering a few meters in the air with their VTOL jets. Then their launch signal was given, and in a roar of hot air and flame, they were gone, screaming out to chase their more nimble escorts.

From their launch position on the aft ends of the Battlecruisers' bows and the sides of the main body, the Vikings and the Wraiths turned sharply, skirting the massive warships' superstructures, and accelerated off towards the encroaching Reaper forces. The combined starfighter force angled 'up' relative to the massive fleet, and this drew the attention of the approaching Occuli and the Reaper capital ships, who quickly altered their trajectory to intercept them.

* * *

><p>On the bridge of the Hyperion, Raynor and Matt watched

the fighters deploy on the tactical display. Their plan was simple; the Wraiths would engage the Occuli and keep them occupied, while the Vikings got into position to launch their long-range anti-capital ship missiles at the Reapers. While that was happening, the Battlecruiser fleet would lay down suppressing fire with their laser batteries, intercepting any inbound missiles and forcing the Reapers to divide their attention between the Vikings and the Battlecruisers. With the Reapers so distracted, a second group of Battlecruisers would approach from the relative 'bottom' of the battle, and engage the Reapers with their Yamato cannons and nuclear missiles. Caught in a three-way crossfire, the Reapers would go down easy, at least so they hoped.

"Alright Matt, they're on their way." Raynor said. "Time to go to work."

"Aye, sir." The dark-haired younger man agreed, nodding while speaking into his headset. "Task Force Echo, you are cleared to disengage from the rest of the fleet, good hunting Captain Adama."

"Thank you sir, good luck." Came the older man's gruff voice in return.

On the threat display, the Battlecruiser task force, numbering in at about a dozen ships led by the Battlecruiser _Galactica_, broke off to the south of the formation to begin their loop towards the Reapers. Meanwhile, the starfighter force continued to close with the Reapers, the Vikings lagging slightly behind the Wraiths.

"Now let's give those folks some cover fire, gunny!" Raynor ordered, strapping himself into his command chair.

"Aye-aye sir!" The man replied. "All ships, target the Reaper formation, maximum firepower!" He tapped a few controls in front of him as he spoke.

All across the hulls of the mammoth vessels, bulky laser turrets rotated to face the Reaper squadron and fired short pulses of red-orange laser energy. The turrets cycled fire; when one began to overheat, it shut down to vent the excess thermal energy, and another turret began firing in its place, and so on. The result was a sheet of laser fire coming from the Battlecruiser formation, which began producing explosions in the mostly empty void between the two forces; the defensive fire had found the missiles the Reaper ships had already launched, as well as a few Occuli still heading towards the main fleet.

"Buffer zone has been established, sir!" The gunnery officer shouted a few minutes later.

"Alright, Matt, give the fighter squadrons the go-ahead, and hang on everyone! This'll be one hell of a ride!"

* * *

><p>The combined starfighter groups screamed through space, engine trails burning behind them. Matt's voice crackled in over the tactical channel. "All squadrons, you are weapons-free, repeat all squadrons are weapons-free."<p>

"Copy that, _Hyperion._" Responded Lieutenant Kara Thrace, callsign Starbuck, before switching her comms system to the squadron-exclusive channel and giving an order. "Alright, listen up, watch your sectors, stay tight on your wingmen, watch out for the Vikings, and for fuck's sake _stay out of the Battlecruisers' firing lines!_"

A plethora of acknowledgements winked back green from her comms board, and the blonde-haired woman nodded grimly before pushing the throttle forward as far as it would go, twisting the yolk as well. Despite the inertial dampeners she was pressed back into her seat as the sound of her engine became extremely high-pitched, even through her helmet and the intervening layers of the Wraith. Beyond the cockpit the stars wheeled, and she briefly got a glimpse of the orange curtain coming from the rest of the fleet before she re-oriented facing the oncoming Occuli swarm.

Her targeting computer pinged that the enemy was within range, and the woman smiled savagely as she pulled back on the yolk's trigger sending dozens of red laser pulses at the oncoming enemy. "They're in range, give 'em hell!" And with that, the battle was joined.

Blasts of energy exploded from both sides, immediately claiming victims, dozens of Occuli fell to the initial onslaught, but the organics' side didn't fair too much better, as dozens of Wraiths suffered heavy damage from concentrated attacks from the Occuli swarm. One unlucky pilot caught a shot directly in the cockpit. The poor bastard didn't even have time to react as the intense energy incinerated him and the cockpit along with him.

Elsewhere dozens of fighters caught glancing blows, some took engine damage and began trailing fire, even as the onboard fire-suppression systems fought to stop it. Some survived, others died in fiery explosions as the ships' magazines and fuel caught fire. Everywhere there was chaos "and then the two forces collided.

In a frenzy, even as the ships flashed by each other, still exchanging gunfire, the individual pilots and robots locked onto targets and began pursuit. A deadly game of cat-and-mouse, where the pilots not only had to watch their sixes and their targets, but everywhere at once, as the furballs got so close together that mid-air collisions became a real concern, evidenced when several ships did collide with one another, shearing off wings, buckling hull plating, or outright destroying both vessels.

Within seconds all sense of formation had been lost, as fighters from both sides violently fought for their lives, weaving in and out of their fellows at speeds almost impossible to track, laser fire and sporadic missiles from the Wraiths lighting up space like strobe lights.

And then the Wraiths engaged their cloaking systems.

Initially the Wraiths wanted to go in already cloaked, to preserve their own lives, but that plan was thrown out when they realized that without the Wraiths visible to draw the Occuli's fire, they would attack the slower, and more vulnerable Vikings, who had to save their ammunition to engage the Reaper capital ships. So the decision was made to wait until the Wraiths had thoroughly engaged the enemy in a tight furball to engage the cloaking systems. Which they just

did.

Suddenly, half of the fighters involved in the fighting vanished, as their cloaking bubbles sprang to life around them. Specially armored hoods slid over the cockpit windows and projected a view of the outside world in at them. The cloaking system masked the ships from exterior detection, but it also prevented the pilots from seeing out. Luckily the fighters' sophisticated sensors were able to compensate for this. As such the Occuli were suddenly left fighting an enemy they couldn't see, much less shoot at. The Wraiths could still pick out where their fellows were to avoid colliding, but the Occuli were left flying blind. Then, almost simultaneously, the Reaper fighters began exploding, as Gemini missiles and burst laser fire exploded from nothingness all around them, spearing the circular fighters and blasting them to smithereens.

Within seconds half the Reaper fighter force had been reduced to molten, twisted scrap slowly tumbling through space, while the Wraiths hadn't taken any further casualties. The remaining Occuli tried to fire blindly in every direction, but even as they scored glancing hits on a few Wraiths, the last of them were obliterated. Flush with their success, the slightly diminished fighter force turned to engage the Reapers.

* * *

><p>The moment the massive warship Executor reverted to realspace, the Chiss Grand Admiral ordered a position and situation report on his fleet. Glancing out the viewport, Thrawn could tell, that they were, thankfully, several hundred thousand clicks away from the bulk of the fighting. He could also make out the burning planet above which the numerous capital ships were fighting, and the planet's solitary, bright white moon, very, _very _close, directly to the ventral starboard sector of the ship.

"Emergency maneuvers!" He ordered. "Settle us into orbit. Comms, where's the rest of the fleet?"

"Coming up now, sir." The young man in the starboard crew pit reported. "We're mostly here, reports are still coming in, but it looks like we've lost two ships in transit."

"Which ships?" The Chiss asked, still staring out the window.

"The _Intolerant,_ a Victory-II, and- the _Chimera,_ sir." He finished solemnly.

Grand Admiral Thrawn afforded a small sigh of regret. The _Chimera_ had been his flagship during his exploration of the Unknown Regions back in the old galaxy. He'd been quite fond of the Imperial-II Star Destroyer, and even more so of its CO captain Gilad Pellaeon, who he found to be more professional and intelligent than many officers in the Empire. His musings were cut short by frantic shouting.

"Sir, the Star Destroyer _Devastator_ is far out of position! She's â€"she came out of hyperspace a few hundred clicks above the moon's surface, facing directly toward it, and she's falling fast!"

"Patch me through, _now_!" The Chiss ordered. The comms officer nodded, and a few seconds later the hologram of the captain of the

stricken Star Destroyer appeared before him.

"Sorry sir," He spoke without preamble. "We're too low, there's nothing that we can do."

"I understand, captain." Thrawn answered levelly. "Launch what fighters and escape pods you can. You will be remembered with honor."

"Thank you sir, give them hell for us!" Thrawn merely nodded.

* * *

><p>Despite the Devastator's massive repulsorlift coils, mammoth engines, and shields. It materialized just too low over the lunar surface, and it was moving just too fast to slow down or stop. In the seconds before impact, the captain valiantly tried to change the angle of his ship's trajectory. The Star Destroyer's bow had just begun to lift up before it hit the lunar regolith.

Everything seemed to move in slow motion, as the very front of the triangular warship hit the ground. The initial shockwave traveled swiftly throughout the ship, dislodging equipment and starfighters, and stunning or killing many personnel. Then the bow armor crumpled, slowly but surely, as the awesome warship ploughed huge chunks of the lunar surface up, throwing dust in all directions. The angle between the Star Destroyer and the moon's surface increased, even as the ship's inertia was rapidly shed. Then, the immense forces acting on the ship found an imperfection in her lateral structure, caused by the Kuat shipbuilders cutting corners when they constructed her. With an almighty roar and squeal of shearing metal, the front third of the Star Destroyer broke off, hitting the ground with sufficient force to produce a large impact crater, and kill what few people remained in that section.

The rear half of the Destroyer continued forward beyond the crash site, launching escape pods and fighters in all directions, and hurtled towards the ground despite the continuing efforts of the surviving crew to slow her descent. Then, with a resounding crash, the remains of the ship hit the ground, buckling her impressive ventral armor, and gouging a huge trench in the lunar surface, until, two miles from her bow, the battered remains of the Devastator slid to a halt. Less than five hundred of her crew remained alive.

* * *

><p>Thrawn watched the crash impassively through the Executor's sensors. When it was over, he turned away. They could spare no resources to retrieve what was left of her crew. The survivors in the ship or in the dozens of escape pods scattered across the moon's surface would have to wait until they had completed their mission for rescue. Meanwhile the Devastator's surviving TIE fighter contingent would be assigned to bolster the Executor's.

Thrawn watched as the fleet came together in the formation he had specifically designed for this operation. Since the Empire had the bizarre notion that they should place the majority of their guns on the 'upper' levels of their ships, and, despite the underbellies of their warships being heavily armored (with the exception of the large

hangar bays) it made it difficult to properly employ their forces without exposing the glaring flaws of the capital ships. Thrawn had solved this problem with a three-part battle formation.

First, the Lancer-class frigates and Victory-class Star Destroyers would be deployed in an advance screen along with the bulk of their fighter squadrons. Next, the Imperial-class Star Destroyers would turn to face their bellies in towards the _Executor'_s and rotate their cannons to face 'out' from the formation, and form a solid triangle of ships underneath the massive Super Star Destroyer. The upshot of this was that the exterior of the formation would be a solid wall of armor and cannons, with the exception of the Star Destroyers' bridges, another glaring flaw that Thrawn silently shook his head at. If the bridge contains the highest ranking and crucial battle personnel, shouldn't you place it where it was _least _likely to be attacked? Idiocy.

It was at the center of this formation that the more vulnerable transport ships and fleet tenders clustered, surrounded on all sides by the powerful warships.

The alien admiral stared at the sensors readings as his fleet mobilized, idly studying the design of the Reapers. Each one was subtly different, but each uniform, mechanical, _precise._ Something about them tugged at his mind, and having been briefed on indoctrination, Thrawn could only marvel at the sheer intricacy of the Reaper indoctrination ability. Not only did they emit signals to disrupt organics' minds, but also their very structure was designed to stick in peoples' minds, to be awe-inspiring and distinctly alien. With that sense, the Reapers got an inroad into an organic's mind, which they would later exploit through further indoctrination.

His fleet now formed up and ready to move, Thrawn ordered them to move towards two clusters of Alliance warships fighting a significant number of Reaper warships. They would assist the beleaguered forces, and punch through long enough to begin landing ground troops to help capture the city called 'London'. They would succeed. They _had_ to. Thrawn vowed silently. For the crews of the _Chimera_, _the _Devastator_, and the _Intolerant_, _they would not fail. He glanced back at the figure on the rear of the bridge, shrouded in a black hood and cloak, and nodded. The figure turned and headed for the turbolift at the far end of the ship, without a word, a silver flash showing for the briefest instant at their waist.

* * *

><p>As the combined starfighter forces of Raynor's Raiders flew towards the Reapers, it immediately became apparent that something was wrong. Namely, the Reapers' ultraviolet GARDIAN lasers were flashing out and killing Wraiths, despite their cloaking systems. The squadron leaders quickly realized that the Reaper capital ships had more powerful sensors than their fighters; sensors that could see the cloaked fighters.<p>

"FUCK!" Starbuck swore as her wingman evaporated into a cloud of glowing plasma. "All ships, this is Renegade lead, go evasive, the damn fuckers can see us!"

She jerked hard on the yolk, and her starfighter bucked around her, just as a glancing blow from the invisible laser beam flashed across

her ship. The maneuver saved her life, but didn't stop all the damage. The concentrated energy cooked off a portside fuel line, causing it to detonate, washing the left side of her fighter in flames.

"Fuck, fuck, fuck!" The woman swore again and again, struggling to stay evasive even as the point-defenses of the nearest Reaper ship carved the strike force into ribbons. "Vikings, where the hell are you!?"

"On it." Came the succinct reply, and hundreds of anti-ship Lanzer torpedoes shot out from the relatively unscathed Viking squadrons. The bright yellow exhaust trails streaked through space, only to impact against the glowing blue kinetic barriers that protected the cyborg ship. Not one missile made it through.

The Reaper ship turned, and fired two sustained Thanix shots through the massed Viking formation, decimating them. Meanwhile the unseen laser fire from the other Reapers was still ravaging the rest of the Wraith force.

"Command, this is Starbuck, we're being torn apart out here!" She roared, ignoring the multiple red warning signals her computers were screaming at her. "We need to disengage!"

"Negative," Came the static-filled reply. "The strike force isn't in position yet, we need-" The voice was suddenly cut off.

"What the fuck are you saying!?" Starbuck screamed, wheeling about in her starfighter, unknowingly dodging another deadly shot from the nearest Reaper. "Wait." Her eyes widened, as she saw three Reaper destroyers break off from the main group-

-And head right for the strike force.

"Oh shit, _Galactica_"

* * *

><p>"We see them." Captain Adama said firmly from the stark, utilitarian bridge aboard his ship. "Attention, all vessels, the cat's out of the bag, open fi-" he was cut off, mid-sentence, as suddenly the Reapers were upon them.<p>

One of the destroyers barreled in through the sporadic laser fire, and landed atop the Battlecruiser _Pegasus_, near to the _Galactica_. Ignoring the defensive laser fire coming from the ship's batteries, which bypassed its kinetic barriers altogether, the destroyer's tentacles firmly grasped hold of the Battlecruiser's superstructure. Then the plating along the Reaper's bow pulled back, revealing the red, glowing firing chamber, and Adama's eyes went wide.

"_Pegasus_!" He shouted into the comm. "Evacuate now!"

Seconds later the Reaper's weapon discharged, carving through the warship's armor plating, and detonated the main reactor in a spectacular yellow-orange fireball. The flaming wreckage of the _Pegasus_ spun away through space, venting atmosphere and bodies.

"Dammit!" Adama swore. "Fire! All ships fire!" Then the destroyer, which had survived the destruction of the other Battlecruiser, turned towards him, even as the other, stunned ships began returning fire at the Reapers. As the thing's energy weapon began charging again, Adama realized that he was next. "Energize the defensive matrix, quickly!" Then, much to his shock, a dozen blasts of blue-white energy detonated against the Reaper's sides, setting off a chain reaction of explosions across the thing's hull, and washing the face of the Reaper in blue fire. It tumbled off into the emptiness, dead and half-melted.

Adama stared in shock. "What the--"

* * *

><p>The disturbance over Jupiter was worsening, the energy swirling in a massive vortex, radiation spiking far beyond normal lethal doses. The Reaper reinforcements had finally noticed the phenomenon, and were slowing to turn and investigate. They weren't nearly decelerated, when with a massive flash which burned out half their optic sensors, the bubble in the fabric of spacetime burst, and through it came the largest armada ever assembled beyond that of the Reapers themselves. Numbering just shy of fifty thousand, and with purple hulls already glowing as their devastating plasma weaponry charged, the Covenant Fleet of Righteous Indignation had arrived.<p>

For twelve whole operating cycles, the Catalyst AI was stunned, trying and failing to determine what had just happened. Unfortunately for it, that delay in a response was just what the Covenant needed. With a flash almost as strong as the one that heralded their arrival, the Covenant fleet launched a wave of plasma torpedoes, chased by slower moving plasma cannon shots and energy projector lances. As the first shots collided and blasted glowing chunks out of the Reapers' hulls, the AI finally, sluggishly ordered a response. The Reapers launched their fighters and began prepping weapons in response to this new threat, even as the Covenant warships launched Seraphs, Banshees, and Phantom boarding ships.

And the battle began.

* * *

><p>"Fuck!" Starbuck swore, as she, as deftly as she could with half her maneuvering jets burned out, flipped up over the hull of a Reaper dreadnaught, pursued by three Occuli.<p>

Shortly after the Wraith force had been all but wiped out, the Reapers had launched more fighters, which were rapidly hunting down the remains of the Terran space forces. Her cloaking system had been shorted out by the glancing point-defense shot from the Reaper earlier, and the rest of her squadron was either dead or had retreated, against orders, back to the protection of the Hyperion, such that it was. The Reapers were closing on the assembled Battlecruisers, and the laser shots from the capital ships weren't doing enough damage fast enough to stop them.

Her targeting computer screamed a warning; the Oculus behind her had obtained a lock. Before she could do anything, a flash of blue and

gold filled her cockpit window for a brief instant, appearing out of nowhere to flash past her ship, and the warning tone vanished.

"What the?" She whispered as her sensors filled up with dozens of new contacts; `_friendly_contacts`. Then a voice crackled in over the radio, broadwaved to the entire fleet.

"En Taro Tassadar, friend Raynor!" Came the dry, but strong male voice. "We apologize for not assisting earlier, but the despicable Reapers blocked our attempts to join your forces." It was the Protoss.

* * *

><p>On the bridge of the `Hyperion` James watched the hologram of the old, green-eyed Protoss Zeratul as they spoke. "Despite their efforts, we are here now. These... abominations will know the true wrath of Auir's champions!"

Raynor, who had just been about to order the tatters of his starfighter force to retreat and have the rest of the fleet to divert to save the assault force, grinned ferally.

"En Taro Tassadar, Zeratul. Good luck, and give 'em hell."

* * *

><p>Starbuck cheered as wave after wave of glowing, broad-winged Phoenixes flew past her, rescuing the remaining starfighters. In the distance, but growing closer fast, were the heavily-built Protoss Warp Rays, which had already begun to unfold like deadly flowers, exposing the focusing crystals of their main weapons; and behind them, the awesome Carriers, which dwarfed even the Terrans' Battlecruisers; and dwarfing them all-<p>

The pilot's eyes went wide at the sight. The size of a city and completely buffed with Rift Burst projectors sprouting along the vessel's length, the Protoss mothership was an awe-inspiring sight. Starbuck hadn't joined the Raiders by the time they had engaged the Purifier above the surface of Haven, but she'd read the after-action reports about the ship. However, nothing could compare to seeing the massive craft up close and in person.

Even as she tried to truly appreciate the bulk of the Protoss fleet, the entirety of it flickered, and vanished from view, with the exception of the mothership. Kara blinked. Then, a solid wall of scintillating blue energy erupted from the nothingness and slammed into the Reaper capital ships, vaporizing them on impact. In a single salvo the entire Reaper strike force had been almost completely devastated. One destroyer, shielded from the wrath of the Protoss by the bulk of a dreadnaught, turned to flee. Growling, Starbuck oriented her fighter to pursue it, not caring that she only had two burst lasers still functioning and no missiles left.

Suddenly, a bronze-and-black craft shimmered into view off to her starboard side. It was odd, shaped like a tuning fork, and asymmetrical. Kara's targeting computer IFF reported the new contact as the 'Void Seeker'. It sped off ahead of her admittedly crippled craft, appearing to trail shadowy smoke behind it. Then it fired a single green shot from between the prongs of its bow. It blew through

the destroyer's shields and ignited against its hull in a blast of green fire. The inferno utterly consumed the Reaper capital ship, burning it up from the inside; the green plasma cloud vaporized the ship's hull, burning its structure into ash.

Kara stared in shock for a few seconds, before glancing down at her displays and noticing that her ship was barely holding itself together. The wireframe representation of her Wraith was a solid, bright red, and warning tones droned in her ears. She slowly throttled back and flew back toward her waiting mothership. She barely noticed the two Phoenix fighters flanking her.

* * *

><p>So, the Starcraft Universe and the Halo Universe enter the fray, blasting their ways into the center of things. I wanted to make this go on a bit more, but decided to cut the chapter off here. And no, the fact that Adama and Starbuck are a part of Raynor's Raiders doesn't mean that sometime in the Starcraft backstory there was a crossover with Battlestar Galactica. I just took the characters from that universe and deposited them in another. Why? For the sake of the story!<p>

Anyways, in the next chapter: 'Groundside' we get to see what Commander Stevens was doing during the battle, some further space action, and, as the name implies; the opening of the ground battle, as well as what Commander Shepard's been up to in all this time. Anyways, please read and review, and Happy New Year!

6. Chapter 6

Well, as part of my New Year's resolution to write, no matter what, a little bit each day, I'm beginning work on the next Chapter of 'Screw This, I'm Firing the Halo Array': Groundside. In this chapter, armies clash, chaos reigns, alliances form, flourish and fall apart, and everywhere at once, the Reapers get their collective asses handed to them. Also: sorry, Shepard's scenes are going to have to wait until next chapter... And all of you Warhammer 40K fans, next time... well there'll be some fighting for the glory of the Emperor!

So now, the continuing epic, of SCREW THIS, I'M FIRING THE HALO ARRAY! Be warned, this is a long chapter.

* * *

><p>Chapter 6 - The Ultimate Showdown Part 4:
Groundside

* * *

><p>On the surface of the planet Earth, in the bombed-out ruins of the once-great city called London, a disturbance occurred. This was not unusual, as the Reaper ground forces were systematically ravaging the city, searching for survivors and stealing any available resources. However, no forces within their universe caused the sudden flash of light, briefly illuminating the piles of rubble and devastated cityscape beneath the cloud-choked sky.<p>

With a thunderous crack, three figures clad in glossy black armor and

clutching short wooden wands appeared in the middle of a bombed-out courtyard, strewn with piles of rubble and dead trees, and ringed in by burned-out buildings. Here and there small fires still sputtered in the otherwise near-darkness.

Harry barely had time to open his eyes behind his heavy-duty goggles before one of the twins roughly shoved him to the ground and the other bellowed, *"Protego maxima!"* at the top of his voice. A thick stream of silver energy erupted from the tip of his upheld wand, splitting apart and arching down a few feet above their heads to form a glowing, translucent dome surrounding the three wizards. The barrier sizzled and crackled where it made contact with the ground, and gave off an ominous-sounding hum.

"Alright there, Harry?" Fred asked, helping the young wizard to his feet. "Sorry about that, we couldn't take any chances with you."

"'s alright." Harry mumbled, dusting himself off. His armor had absorbed the shock of the fall; he wasn't even winded by it, just surprised. "Blimey." He whispered, focusing his gaze beyond the haze of the shield.

The city around them was devastated; it looked like old photographs of cities destroyed in World War II, right down to the black and white coloration, caused by heavy, black, overcast clouds occasionally shot through with lightning and the rumbling of thunder. Off in the distance, and over the sounds of the shield, Harry could make out muted booms and crackles, although he didn't know what it meant. He rationalized it as just being part of the storm.

"Bloody hell." George whispered, his wand still held in the air, maintaining the shield. "What happened here?"

"_Tempus et anno._" Fred intoned, waving his wand in a curious spiral motion, while moving his head from side to side, trying to watch every shadow at once.

Harry followed his example, but froze as his eyes lit on a part of the skyline. "Guys." He whispered.

"Merlin," Fred said quietly, gazing at the floating, hazy numbers hanging in midair before him. "George, check it out, look at the year."

"2185?" His twin said incredulously. "Merlin's balls. If this is the future I don't think I want to live to see it."

"Guys." Harry repeated, a little louder.

"Is the air here breathable?" George asked, his voice slightly strained from the effort of maintaining the shield, as Fred cast several wordless detection charms.

"Yeah, kinda smoky, but tolerable." He replied. "Nothing too bad for us here, guess we can get rid of these." He waved his wand and dispelled the trio's bubblehead charms. He breathed in deeply, noting the scent of dust and smoke on the air, as well as something else he couldn't readily identify. "Now we've just gotta figure out where we are."

"Guys!" Harry hissed, finally getting their attention.

"Wha-" Fred began to ask before stopping with a gasp, his eyes going wide.

"Bloody hell." George whispered.

There, in the distance, illuminated by a mysterious, single thread of white light arching skyward, was an all-too familiar clock tower. Big Ben. They were in London.

"What in God's name happened here?" Fred asked no one in particular, his wand out and his eyes wide. "I mean, just what the hell's going on around here?"

"We're in London." Harry whispered in shock. "This place, it's home."

"Guys, I can't hold this much longer," George said, his teeth gritted and his eyes clenched. "Get ready to move."

"Got it." Fred replied, steadying his grip on his wand. Harry followed his example, and with a flick of his wrist his holly and phoenix-feather wand was in his hand. Then, with a gasp, the silver shield around them flickered and died, and George lowered his wand, panting.

"Alright, now let's-" He suddenly stopped as an eerie howling echoed through the courtyard.

"What, was, that?" Harry asked slowly. He soon got his answer, as a horde of things emerged from one of the crumbling buildings. They were shaped like humans, horribly emaciated humans with glowing white-blue eyes, tubing covering their thin, purpled skin, leering, skull-like grins, and long, talon-like fingers.

The zombie-like things uttered breathy, high-pitched wails and charged at the trio of wizards, claws outstretched.

"Good God!" George swore, aiming his wand. "Cantanar Fulgrex!" A twisting stream of blue lightning flew from his wand, accompanied by a resounding clap of thunder, and impacted the lead Husk. It flash fried the twisted cyborg, blowing out the cybernetics with its body and charbroiling what little organic flesh remained. The lightning arced from the first Husk to the others, and in seconds the small cluster had been reduced to charred, carbonized skeletons, mouths twisted open in the agony of death.

Harry stared at the sight, stunned at things' appearance and their sudden deaths, when Fred slapped him on the shoulder. "Harry, snap out of it! There are more of them!"

Harry shook himself and looked up from the smoking bodies. It was as if a floodgate had been opened; more and more of the things were pouring out of the surrounding buildings and alleys, seemingly without end, all snarling mouths and claws. Fred and George were suddenly at each other's backs, casting so fast it was like a constant stream of multicolored light was erupting from their wand tips. Their voices were inaudible over the blasts from their wands and the shrieking of the husks, even as they exploded, caught fire,

or were mauled by transfigured wolves.

Turning to face some of the abominations that were trying to flank them, Harry followed their lead and raised his wand. "_Stupefy!" _He incanted, and watched with satisfaction as the jet of red light smote one of the things and it collapsed, the lights on its body dimming.

"Harry, you dolt!" One of the twins shouted angrily, interrupting the stream of spells even as his twin cast a smoky-gray curse that vaporized three of the things. "Don't stun them, kill them!"

Harry froze up; he'd never intentionally killed anything, save for the basilisk his second year, and even then he only did it to prevent the snake from hurting anyone, he hadn't even meant to kill Quirrell, it just happened. He'd tried to kill Bellatrix but on reflection, he didn't think he could have gone through with it. However, he had no time to dwell on it any further as a cluster of the things jumped down from the rooftop above him and landed not ten feet away, even as the other group flanking them was killed by a thick stream of golden energy, which sprouted like a whip from one of Fred's wands.

"Ah! _Reducto!_" He shouted the blasting curse and jabbed his wand at the nearest husk in a panic. The blue streak of light hit the cyber-zombie in the stomach, and blew the thing in half, spraying Harry and everything around it with dark red blood and gore.

Harry's mind went numb at the sight and a cold spike of fear wedged itself in his belly, but his arm and mouth suddenly seemed to take on a life of their own, and they moved as one targeting each husk and felling it with a different curse.

"_Reducto, confodio, tonare, tonare, expulso._" Blasting, piercing, bone-breaker, explosive, each one incanted calmly and surely, spells he barely remembered from studying for the Triwizard Tournament and the DA now flew from his mouth, called from memory by the necessity of desperation and fueled by adrenaline. Curse after curse left his wand, finding the encroaching husks almost without fail. Those that missed blasted huge chunks of rock out of the surrounding landscape, with accompanying detonations. With all his thoughts focused on surviving the nightmare he suddenly found himself thrust into, Harry barely blinked as a cutting curse violently decapitated a charging Husk, or as he repositioned to blow another one into bloody chunks with a blasting hex.

Harry soon lost himself in the haze of the battle, being only vaguely aware of the twins at his back and that they had drifted into the center of the courtyard, edging their way along and covering each others' sectors. His focus narrowed to a small point as he methodically mowed down enemy after enemy, the bodies and other remains soon littered the ground around him. Harry was only barely realized that he now held his second wand in his left hand; he'd transitioned into using it smoothly sometime during the fighting. Harry's mind, numb with shock and adrenaline, focused solely on staying alive, as curse after curse flashed through the courtyard, briefly illuminating the darkness and surrounding landscape, and the charging, snarling husks, in an eerie strobe-like effect.

Suddenly Harry felt a sharp punch to his gut that forced him to one knee. Gasping, his left arm curled protectively around his bruised,

but intact stomach, Harry stared up at the form in the upper level of a store to his left. There crouched a great hulking, misshapen thing, with a glowing blue mouth ringed with what appeared to be dried blood and four glowing eyes. Its whole body was an ugly, brown and tan color, with cancerous looking growths covering its bulging, lumpy back. One arm was raised and contained some sort of weapon, which fired a hail of bright yellow shots at him and the twins. One of them had caught Harry in the stomach, which was what forced him to the ground, but his armor had taken the hit and survived.

Snarling, Harry jabbed his right hand at the Cannibal and screamed the same incantation that George had earlier. "_Cantanar Fulgrex!" _His holly wand let out a blast like a gun and a brilliant blue bolt of lightning flew from its tip. However, instead of merely electrocuting the Reaper soldier, it blew it into bloody chunks, its entrails spattering the nearby walls with blood and slime.

Growling, Harry lashed out with his wand, not even bothering to incant a spell. A solid red wedge of force rippled out from the tip, bisecting the charging husks at about waist-level, causing their top halves to slide slowly off of their twitching legs with soft, wet smacks.

Then, all at once, it was over, the silence was deafening to the trio's ringing ears. Harry slowly became aware that there were no more targets in his field of view, and that the blasts issuing from Fred and George's wands had stopped as well. The courtyard was littered with whole bodies and severed limbs, and the flagstones were awash with crimson blood and unidentifiable chunks of flesh and guts. Harry slowly lowered his shaking wands, which had smoke curling from their tips, and took a deep shaky breath, and then he fell to his hands and knees, puking his guts out, as the stench of death and the reality of what he'd done hit him.

_Oh my God, I _slaughtered _them!_ He realized with horror in between heaving breaths. _And I didn't care, I was-_ Then his vision began to grey out as a deep weariness overtook him and he started to pass out, only to be jerked to his feet as the twins grabbed him roughly under the arms.

"Ickle Harrickens has been holding out on us." George said, panting from the exertion of sustained spell casting.

"Too right," Fred added, he was winded himself. "If we'd known you could cast that fast and that powerfully, we'd-"

An ear-splitting, high-pitched shriek echoed throughout the remains of the courtyard, cutting off the twins' banter.

"What the bloody hell was that?" George asked.

"Dunno, but it can't be good." Fred responded, digging in his pack for something. "Damn, I know it's in here somewhere..."

Suddenly the shriek came again much closer, and with a flash and a ripple a towering, glowing figure appeared. Waves of purple biotic energy rolled off of the ten-foot tall Banshee, making the air hum.

"Sweet Merlin!"

"What the fuck is _that!?!_"

Harry, utterly spent, barely had the energy to raise his head, much less react to this new threat. It was ten feet tall, and covered in desiccated, dead-looking flesh interspersed with glowing cybernetics, much the same as the other monsters they'd just fought. The thing's stomach bulged, as did its large breasts, however there was absolutely nothing alluring about it. The banshee's gaunt, grinning; skull-like head was covered in spiky, protrusions, and it stared at them with dead, pitch-black eyes. Like the Husks, it possessed long talons in place of fingers, and it stood on long, unnaturally thin legs.

Without any warning the Banshee raised one arm and sent a blast of blue-white biotic energy at the trio, who "still stunned by the monster's sudden appearance- barely reacted in time

"_Protego!_" Fred shouted, and a shimmering silver shield snapped up between them and the banshee to intercept the projectile.

With the sound of breaking glass, the blast hit the shield and exploded violently, washing the face of the shield charm in electricity. The spell dispelled the shot, but shattered from the force of it, the magical backlash actually causing Fred to stagger back.

"_Tonare!_" George fired off a bone-breaking hex at the creature, covering for his twin while he recovered. Much to his shock, the orange spell impacted a glowing purple barrier that flared into existence a few feet from the thing's skin and dissipated. The banshee took a step forward and screamed in a horrible, ear-splitting pitch, producing a shockwave that shot straight at the twins and blasted them off their feet. They landed in a heap several feet away.

Harry, nearly overcome with magical exhaustion, could only watch as the horrific monster walked up slowly to stand over him. His wands slid from his grasp as he felt himself rise, seemingly unsupported, into the air. He found himself staring into the banshee's nightmarish, skull-like face and dead, pitch-black eyes, as it gently raised a taloned hand up to stroke his face in a twisted mockery of a lover's caress...

"_AVADA KEDAVRA!_" Harry barely had time to register the incantation of the hated killing curse coming from one of the twins, as there was a flash of green light and a rushing sound. The banshee instantly crumpled to the ground as the curse slammed into its side, and Harry, now unsupported by the reaper's biotics, fell unceremoniously to the ground, shaking legs giving out from under him.

Suddenly one of the twins appeared above him, worry evident on his face. "Harry, Harry! Oh God, are you ok?" Harry managed to nod weakly, and the twin -Fred- hoisted him off of his feet in a fireman's carry; him holding Harry's arms in one hand and his ankles in the other, with his body draped across Fred's back.

"Let's go!" The other twin shouted. "C'mon, we've gotta get off the streets!"

"Grab the thing he stunned," The one holding harry replied, awkwardly summoning Harry's wands with one of the hands holding the young wizard up. "We might learn something from it."

George nodded, and levitated the husk with a whispered "_Mobilicorpus." _They ran to the nearest building, which had a shattered front door and an illegible sign hanging above it. George went first, leaving the stunned husk floating in the air by Fred and Harry and ran to the far wall of the structure, which had a single, half-open sliding door. Peeking inside, he turned to his brother.

"All clear!"

Dragging the husk behind him, Fred forced his way into the back room, before George waved his wand, causing the sliding door to slam shut.

"_Colloportus._" He whispered, pointing his wand at the door, which sealed itself with a squelching sound. "_Lumos._" A bright light flared from the wandtip, illuminating the long, enclosed space. His eyes widened at the sight; one of the room's walls was lined with suits of armor, and the other with odd, boxy objects. Crates of softly glowing, small red and black cylinders covered the floor.

Fred, meanwhile, propped Harry up against one wall, and after some digging, produced a potion vial, the contents of which he forced Harry to drink. After a few seconds, his head turned a bright red, steam shot out of his ears, and he started coughing.

"Thanks, guys." He gasped out, feeling a sudden surge of energy flood his body. "What was that?"

"Pepperup potion," Fred explained, replacing the vial in his backpack. "And Re'em blood."

"Gives you a bit of a boost, especially after exerting yourself like that." George added. "Nice bit of spellcasting by the way. You still need a lot of training, but you've got potential."

Harry grunted in reply, and slowly got to his feet. "What the hell is going on here? And what are those... _things?_" He whispered, mostly to himself, shuddering as he remembered the battle, and the way the thing had stroked his face while staring into his eyes. He shook again and his stomach did back-flips, he didn't know what that monster had been about to do, and he prayed he never found out.

"Well, apparently,"

"We're in London, a couple hundred years in the future, as for what's happening out there,"

"We don't know-"

"-But we intend to find out." The twins said, finishing each other's sentences again. They both turned to look at the husk, floating and stunned at the far end of the room.

"_Incarceous._" One of them hissed, and inky-black ropes flew from his wand and bound the husk up tightly.

"Come here Harry." George said, holding out a hand. Confused, Harry took it, and watched as George grabbed Fred's left hand with his free one.

"On three." Fred said, leveling his wand at the ugly cyborg's grey-skinned head. "One, two, three. _Legillimens!"_

Images rushed by Harry, almost too fast to see. He was vaguely aware of the twins' presence beside him as they dove into the thing's memories. They saw...

...A grinning man with short-cropped black hair and an immaculate navy-blue uniform with gold trim, holding a young baby girl in one arm and kissing a pretty, blonde-haired woman on the cheek...

...A news report showing strange shapes appearing above a stylized map of the Earth on a television screen, displaying the headline 'Fleet Mobilizing Above Europe'. The same man as before watched grimly, clad in armor similar to the suits in the room they were currently standing in, a group of similarly dressed men and women watching with him...

...They saw a different news report, this time showing two men, one of them a hologram. "I really wouldn't lend any credence to reports of mythical, sentient warships coming to kill us." One said...

...Explosions rocked the city as massive, dark shapes descended from the sky, firing brilliant red beams at the buildings which vaporized whatever they touched. The man and his fellow soldiers raced through a neighborhood on foot, firing massive assault rifles at indistinct shadowy forms in the distance...

_...Two of the big, four-eyed, blobby things had a hold of him, they dragged him over to a cluster of strange purple tripods lying on the ground. He struggled, but the Reaper abominations were too strong for him. They tossed him over one of them, his back to the ground. _Pain_. Pain beyond anything the marine had ever known erupted, as a massive spike shot out from the tripod and impaled him. It passed through his armor like tissue paper, and towered above his head, covered with his blood and viscera..._

_...Fire, lines of burning fire spread out from the hole in his chest. He couldn't even scream, it was like he was in a haze, his mind shutting down. His veins felt like they'd been filled with hot lead. His head flopped bonelessly to the side, and then with a feeling like a red-hot spike was shoved into it, he felt his heart _stop..._

_...The burning lines of fire raced out along his limbs, he saw, through distant, haze-filled eyes, as his armor disintegrated, falling away from his oddly thin, pale limbs. Then the skin turned purple, as if covered in bruising. Strange bulges appeared, twisting and writhing just below the surface of his arm, until with a sickening _pop_, small, glowing circular blue lights forced their way through his skin, erupting with a spray of dark blood. They were followed by long, ribbed tubes, which snaked down his arm, burying themselves

deep into the flesh, and terminating just before his hands and fingers-turned talons. The burning sensation raced along his head, reaching his eyes, and his vision began to grey out, becoming blurry and indistinct. Then his field of view narrowed into a single point, and vanished, accompanied by a barely-audible popping sound and two red-hot spikes of pain being driven into his eye sockets. As a warm, chunky fluid flowed down his cheeks, the tortured man realized what had happened. MY EYES! He screamed inside his head through the haze of pain. MY EYES! MAKE IT STOP, PLEASE, I'LL DO ANYTHING! Then the fire reached deep into his brain, and the nightmare truly began..._

...Searing pain, like nothing he'd ever felt before. His entire existence was whited out, there was nothing but the agony. He- he'd forgotten something, what- what was it? His name, he'd forgotten his name! The marine struggled to remember something, anything. A vision hazily formed, temporarily distracting him from the agony. An athletic, blonde-haired woman, clad only in a thin blue nightgown, her dark eyes sparkling mischievously as she beckoned towards him. A warm feeling erupted from... somewhere within him and the pain lessened somewhat. With a searing, tearing feeling, the memory was torn away, leaving him floating in the darkness. He- he'd forgotten something... something important, he felt like he'd just had a hold of it, but...

...Whispering, whispering noises in the background, whispering that drove him to annoyance, although he didn't know why. He couldn't- couldn't understand what they were saying. The buzzing was incessant, but unintelligible, and he felt- suddenly he felt nothing, he just realized it was there, but didn't care. Another memory, this time of him driving a small four-wheeler with a dark-haired, young-looking woman hanging on behind him appeared. They were heading out to a hill overlooking a gleaming city, she had laughed, had leaned in towards him.,, Then with a flash of pain it too was gone, and the marine's ravaged mind didn't even realize what had happened save for a vague sensation of loss. Why? The almost-completely wiped-out human portion of his mind managed to whisper to itself, not understanding why it felt so empty, tortured, and alone. Why? That last scrap of humanity shuddered as suddenly a massive, intricate, and inconceivably alien intelligence brushed up against it. In that moment, the last remnants of his human self were brushed aside like an old cobweb, and it showed the cancerous thing that now inhabited his body the reason why...

...There was his wife and young daughter although he didn't even recognize them anymore, lying in the dirt and screaming in untold agony. Their flesh began dissolving, skin pulling back and disappearing, the muscles, organs, and even their bones dissolved into gray, sloppy goo. He could only watch, impassively, as their eyes dissolved and the skin peeled off of their shrieking, still-living skulls, and then their skulls cracked open, revealing quickly decomposing brains, which slopped out onto the ground next to them. As both she and her daughter writhed and gurgled, their minds, feelings, memories, everything they were, utterly gone. A shadow appeared over the scene; a massive, tentacled form hovered silently above the decomposing pair, covered in far too many eyes, all of which glowed with an evil, red light.

YOU EXIST BECAUSE WE **_ALLOW**_** IT. **_Bellowed a deep, mechanical voice that seemed to echo from deepest levels of hell.

__**AND NOW YOU WILL END, BECAUSE WE **_**DEMAND**_** IT!**_

With a flash, Fred yanked his wand away from the husk's head, reeling back in shock. His eyes were wide and his skin was pale, sweat plastered his hair to his head. George was shaking like a leaf, equally pale, and Harry was doubled over, dry-heaving.

"God above." Fred whispered after several minutes. "What, what the _hell_?"

"To hell with the prophecy." George whispered backing away and hitting the wall. "I'm not letting that happen to me. I'm getting out of here!" His eyes wildly looked from Fred to Harry. "C'mon, we've gotta activate the return portkey and go home!"

"No." Harry whispered after a moment, catching both twins by surprise.

"Look Harry, I know you want the Dark Lord dead, I do too!" George shouted, his voice becoming high-pitched. "But-but look at those things, look what they did to him! Whatever's happening here is worse than Voldemort! We don't stand a -"

"That's exactly it." He replied quietly, rising to his feet and wiping his mind. "These monsters don't even care about us, everything we'd accomplish, love, marriage, _children_." He whispered slowly, trembling as he remembered the young girl's screaming while her flesh vaporized. "Nothing matters to them, remember the way that thing spoke? To them, we're less than insects, less than dust. Well I say _fuck them._ Whatever they are, they came here to exterminate us, to kill all the human beings on Earth. I don't care if this isn't home, I'm not gonna stand by while those things slaughter everyone out there." He looked them in the eye, and the twins realized that he wasn't shaking out of shock or fear, but out of cold, hard fury.

Harry's heart burned with so much anger he couldn't control it, and with only a slight jolt he realized he _didn't care_. These, these abominations had come to Earth to slaughter, to kill every last one of them, they'd made their contempt for all life clear. He didn't give a damn about Voldemort anymore, or avenging his parents or Sirius, all that mattered, all that he could think of was the little girl -_she couldn't have been older than four!- _Dissolving beneath the alien intellect's eyes, and how the same thing had methodically stripped everything away from her father, leaving him as just a twisted, undead husk. No matter how long it took-

"I'm going to kill them, every last one of them." He vowed, raising his wand to point at the bound husk. "_Reducto!_" With a cracking noise, the desecrated corpse's head evaporated into a bloody mist from the force of the blasting curse. _Rest in peace, _a small corner of his mind whispered to the dead man's soul.

"You can go back if you want, I'm staying here, and I'll show these things, I'll, I'll, I'm going to fucking KILL THEM ALL!" Harry shouted angrily.

The twins shared a look. "We're with you Harry." They agreed after a long moment. "We've come this far already, and in for a knut, in for a galleon dad always said."

"But we'll need something else to fight with," George said sheepishly, looking down on his wand holsters. "I don't know if I can go through another battle constantly casting like that. And who knows how many of those things are out there?"

Fred nodded empathetically. Meanwhile Harry sagged; his momentary rage vanished, leaving him feeling hollow and weak. The twins began pacing around the room, taking note of the dark grey, full-body suits of armor hanging on one wall.

"Right, see if we can find some guns, George and I have had training with the Unspeakables." Fred said, looking around and grabbing one of the surprisingly heavy objects off of its rack on the wall. "What is this thing?" He muttered, turning it over in his hands. _There wouldn't be this many of them in one place if they weren't weapons of some sort, _He thought. _Especially so close to these armor suits, but what is it?_

He noticed a glowing red button on one side of the metal object, and after a second of hesitation, he pressed it, preparing to throw it away if it turned out to be a bomb. With a mechanical whir, the boxy construct rapidly unfolded itself into the shape of a large rifle. Swearing, Fred dropped it and jumped back, startling Harry and George, who hadn't been paying close attention.

"What, is that a gun?" George asked incredulously. _A self-assembling gun? Wicked!_

Fred cautiously stepped forward and gingerly picked the weapon up. It was a deep black color, with an odd, over-under, double-barreled design. There was some writing on the side, which Fred peered at carefully.

"'N7 Valkyrie?'" He said uncertainly, holding the gun at arm's length. "Wonder what that means?"

"Go ahead," His brother urged. "Try it out." Noting Harry and Fred's incredulous looks, he defended himself. "Look, I'd rather we learn how it shoots in here than in the middle of a battle!"

Uncertainly, Fred slid his wand back into its holster and brought the weapon up, pointing it at the far end of the room. He gingerly placed his right index finger on the trigger and jerked back on it, hard. The weapon jumped in his hands and barked twice in quick succession as both the upper and lower barrels flashed, sending two hypervelocity rounds streaking down the room to impact the far wall.

His ears still ringing from the gunshots, Fred lowered the gun and turned to face his brother and Harry, who were staring at him.

"Wicked." He said with a grin.

oOo

"How many drops is this for you, lieutenant?" Ellen Ripley asked as the dropship plummeted through the upper atmosphere of LV-426. All around her, crammed into the confines of the cramped APC, the rest of

Gorman's marine unit exchanged a few words in a quiet undertone, or in corporal Hicks' case; slept. All of them were clad in bulky, digital-patterned ceramic armor complete with helmets and other assorted gear.

"Thirty-eight," The soft-looking marine officer replied in a shaky voice from his seat at the command console, surrounded by readouts on the entire squad. "Simulated."

"How many combat drops?" Vasquez, the Hispanic, hard-hitting smartgunner asked from near the other end of the APC.

"Uh, two... including this one." He replied sheepishly.

"Jesus." Private Hudson muttered loudly.

Suddenly there came a lurch, then another and another, followed by the familiar, swooping sensation of falling in everyone's guts.

"What the?" One of the marines said.

Suddenly all the lights and electronics in the APC cut out, plunging them into total darkness. The dropship lurched, again and again, jostling the now slightly concerned marines around.

"Uh, Gorman, what's going on?" Asked Burke, in a worried tone of voice. The curly-haired company representative was sitting next to Ripley.

"Power failure of some kind." He muttered, fumbling around his console blindly. "I'll see if I can-"

A loud echoing crash accompanied a sudden jerk as everyone was thrown around in his or her restraints incessantly. Equipment and weapons flew from the overhead containment racks, smashing people about their heads. Someone screamed, and the APC tilted wildly. Then came another crash, and another, then a deep rumbling sound. After a moment more, during which there was a feeling of movement and then a final jerk, the rumbling, crashing sounds and sensations stopped.

A minute passed in total silence, then another.

"Alright," The platoon sergeant Apone said loudly. "Who's not dead? Sound off!"

A chorus of groans greeted his question, and then there came a pop and a hiss, and the light of a flickering red flare held in Apone's hand suddenly lit the interior of the APC.

"Well, what are you waiting for boys and girls, an engraved invitation? Let's get up and get moving! Hudson, Hicks, check weapons, everyone else get ready. If we've landed, then we've got a job to do, and if this is hell... Well, then we'll regroup with the rest of the corps that's here already and see about taking this place over!"

"Hoo-rah!" Came the slightly unenthusiastic response.

"Are you alright?" The android Bishop asked Ripley, who was clutching

a bleeding gash on the back of her head.

"I'm fine, go away." The dark-haired woman replied, brushing the android off and looking around the cramped, skewed interior of the APC. Gorman was slumped in his seat, his hat askew, either dead or unconscious, and Burke...

His head was twisted at an unnatural angle, his neck was bruised, and his eyes were glassy. He was definitely dead.

"Bishop!" Apone shouted.

"Yes?" The android replied.

"I need a sitrep! Where the hell are we, and what's going on?"

"Yes sir, Mr. Burke is dead," The android gestured at the dead executive before placing two fingers on Gorman's neck. "The lieutenant is unconscious, but alive. I can't see anything outside of the APC, I don't know what's going on." He had been sitting in the driver's seat of the APC when they'd crashed.

"What about the lights? Where's our power?" The black sergeant demanded.

"I'm not sure, I think whatever happened to us probably tripped the breakers. I'll check them." Bishop squatted down and pulled back a panel from the floor of the APC, exposing a metal box and several cable bundles.

"Right, Hicks, Vasquez, Hudson, go outside and see about the pilots, and try to find out what the hell happened!"

"Yes sir!" Hicks responded, hefting his pulse rifle in one hand. "Hudson, help me with the door." The two marines grabbed hold of the large sliding side panel and pulled it open after disengaging the lock. Popping a flare in one hand, he walked out into the demolished cargo bay of the dropship. Several of the upper supports had given way; the heavy beams had fallen, partially blocking access to the catwalks that lined the cargo bay, making the already-cramped hold that much harder to get through, and scrap metal covered the buckled floor. Vasquez trailed behind them, holding a pistol instead of her usual smartgun, which was too bulky to maneuver through the confines of the dropship.

"This place is a mess." Hudson commented as they headed for the forward stairs to the cockpit.

"Yeah."

The marines walked up the stairs and pried open the cockpit hatch, stopping up short at what they saw. They knew that there had been a crash landing, and they'd expected the pilots to be dead (which they were, blood dribbled from their open mouths), however they weren't prepared for the view beyond the shattered cockpit windscreen. Instead of the desolate, rocky landscape of LV-426, there was a devastated city stretching off as far as the eye could see, sprawling beneath a dark, evil-looking sky.

The three marines were quiet for a time, before Hudson chimed in.

"Now, either those colonists have been _really_ _busy, or I don't think we're in Kansas anymore."

"Hey, knock it off," Vasquez whispered to him, slapping him upside the helmet. "This is serious. What the fuck is going on, Hicks? Where the hell are we?"

"I don't know, ok? You two stay here, keep an eye on things, I'll get the sarge." Hicks whispered, slapping Vasquez on her armored shoulder.

He quickly slid back down the railing, and picked his way back to the APC.

"Right, this thing's a write-off." Apone was saying. "Alright people, looks like we're hoofing it this time, grab your weapons. I want to be mobile in five minutes. Let's go, assholes and elbows!"

"Sir," Hicks said, standing at the entrance of the APC. When Apone didn't respond he spoke louder. "Sergeant!"

"Yeah, Hicks, what's the situation?" He asked, turning away from the activity within the APC

"Both pilots are dead, sir, we've crash landed, and- well, you gotta see this for yourself."

"Why, what is it?" The NCO asked, suspiciously.

Hicks started to respond when an echoing scream came from the cockpit. The two marines looked at each other for half a second before running for the access stairs, Hicks in the lead. They found Vasquez hanging onto the edge of the cockpit entrance slightly overbalanced, as if she'd been shoved out the door. She pulled herself up just as Apone and Hicks finished climbing the cramped staircase.

"Get it off, get it off!" Hudson screamed, trying to fend off a large, discolored humanoid abomination, its skin covered in glowing cybernetics, which was straddling him where he stood, and seemed to be trying to tear out the man's throat.

Hicks froze at the sight, blocking Apone's view of the struggle. _What the hell is that thing?_ Vasquez however, didn't. With a grunt the woman grabbed the husk by the throat, lifted it off Hudson, and slammed it into a wall. Without any time to retrieve her pistol from where she had dropped it, she merely pulled out her combat knife with her free hand, and impaled the husk through one glowing eye, splattering herself with blood in the process. The inhuman thing stopped struggling and went limp, and she let it slide to the floor, keeping a firm grip on her knife.

Hudson shakily regained his footing and stared at the husk's body. "What the _fuck_ is that thing!?" Vasquez looked over at him, and then over his shoulder. Her eyes widened.

"Hudson look out!" She shouted, grabbing the front of his armor and yanking him through the door just as three hypervelocity rounds blew through the cockpit where his head had been, shattering the glass and tearing through the dropship bulkhead. The four marines tumbled down

the stairs just as a detonation went off in the cockpit, filling it with orange fire. Another blast struck the dropship, shaking the whole craft, then another, and another.

"What the hell is going on?" Apone demanded, getting to his feet after untangling himself from the others.

"We need to get the fuck out of here, sir!" Hicks shouted, his statement punctuated by more pounding from the outside.

Apone nodded and stuck his head in the APC door as Vasquez and Hudson filed in to retrieve more weapons. "Marines, WE ARE LEAVING!" He bellowed over the continuing assault of the reapers' weapons. "We are under attack, unknown hostiles, get ready for one hell of a fight! Crowe, you take the L-T! Bishop, look after Ripley!" He turned to Hicks. "Corporal, we need an exit!"

The marine nodded, and, hefting his pulse rifle; pumped a ten-millimeter grenade into the launcher and fired it at the rear of the dropship's cargo bay. The muted explosion tore apart the far wall, creating a sizable hole. "Exit's clear, sir!" He reported.

"Alright, let's go people, move, move, MOVE!" Apone bellowed as the marines and two crouching civilians poured out of the APC and through the gap Hicks had created. "Let's go!"

And then they were outside, under the dark, brooding sky, in the middle of an open, desolate parking lot, surrounded in the distance by multiple buildings several hundred meters away. Far off to their left, a single thread of silver light reached up into the sky, providing meager illumination in the near-darkness. The marines' tactical flashlights, mounted on their shoulders, automatically switched on, giving them a bit more light.

"What the fuck?" Frost whispered from the circular formation they'd taken up upon exited the wreckage.

"Where the hell are we?" Drake, the other smartgun operator, asked.

"Alright, we make for those buildings straight ahead, LET'S GO!" Apone bellowed inwardly wincing; there was no cover aside from the crashed dropship, and there was no way they could stay pinned down there. "First squad, go, go, go!"

Vasquez, Dietrich, Frost, Hicks, and Hudson ran forward. The smartgunner took point with Hudson and Hicks covering the flanks and Dietrich and Frost covering the rear.

"Second squad, let's move!" Apone bellowed, charging forward as the rest of his platoon and the two civilians charged forward after the others, Bishop holding Ripley's right arm, his eyes darting from side-to-side.

Suddenly, a flaming chunk of debris landed near the first squad in an explosion. Apone's eyes widened as the fire died and more of those things that had attacked Hudson rushed out from the landing site. Not debris or artillery; it was some sort of drop pod, he realized.

Hicks saw it too. "Let's rock! He shouted, stopping up short, bringing his pulse rifle up and firing a short burst. Apone and Wierzbowski did too, but realized there wasn't any point. Hicks' burst killed all of the husks in sprays of gore. The things were dammed fragile, one or two bullets were enough to put them down. In less than a second afterwards, they were all moving again.

"Keep moving!" Apone shouted encouragement, as the buildings grew ever closer. Suddenly another flaming drop pod landed right in front of both squads. And from it emerged...

A massive hulking form, covered in rust-colored armor plating, two huge, oversized arms ending in metallic claws, and a disproportionately small head on a ridiculously long neck, the thing was a juggernaut. It bellowed at the marines, a spine-chilling sound, and its beady little eyes turned blood red.

"Kill it!" Hudson screamed from the front, swinging his pulse rifle forward to shoot the hulking Brute.

His bullets, and those from Vasquez's massive smartgun, pinged audibly off of the thing's heavy armor, otherwise doing no damage. The Brute seemed to crouch for a second, and then it exploded forward in a frenzy of motion. The front squad dove out of its way, but Frost wasn't fast enough. The brute swung one heavy arm around and caught the dark-skinned marine in the midsection. There was a loud crunch, and the marine's body flew ten feet away and landed in a heap, the front of his armor caved in. He didn't move.

"Grenades!" Apone shouted, pumping back the action on his pulse rifle and firing a grenade at the thing that had just killed one of his men.

Four others joined it. Three of them impacted the brute's shoulders and head, the explosions causing it to stagger, but the last two hit it in the belly, and managed to blow off the thick armor covering it. Then the thing's thick, oily-colored intestines spilled out onto the ground along with a copious amount of blood, staining the dust black. The reaper creature tried to gather its guts up with one hand, while holding the other up in a defensive pose. Hicks, seeing an opening from where he'd sprawled in the dust, primed another grenade and tossed it just under the thing's squat legs. It went off, vaporizing the brute's insides and killing it.

As the brute slumped over and let out an echoing howl, Apone rushed forward and grabbed Hudson by the collar of his armor. "Come on, we have to keep moving! Run goddammit!" He shoved him forward roughly and turned...

Bishop and Ripley were up and moving, already passing him to join the others, but Crowe struggled under the weight of the lieutenant he held over his shoulders. Further back beyond him... Monstrosities. That was the only word Apone could think of to describe them, monsters that scuttled, loped, and sprinted after the fleeing marines, he couldn't even make out distinct shapes among the teeming horde. He started to shout a warning, and bring his gun to bear, but one of the things raised some sort of weapon before he could do anything. There was a flash and a muted report, and several large holes were blown through Crowe's chest, clean through his armor,

showering him with blood as the marine and his now-dead passenger collapsed.

"FUCK!" The sergeant screamed, firing wildly back at the oncoming swarm.

Then one of the things, which resembled a fleshy orange sack with four legs and two cannons sighted in on them with a blue laser and fired several crackling red blobs of energy in their direction. Most of them missed, but one shot caught Drake right in the stomach and vaporized the large smartgunner instantly in a wash of orange fire. Apone had seen enough to know he couldn't fight these things on the open terrain, and turned and retreated with the rest of his squad, shooting blindly over his shoulder at their pursuers as explosions erupted around him.

As they ran for the perceived safety of the buildings, Hudson happened to glance up. He skidded to a stop as he shouted inarticulately at the top of his voice, falling on his ass and kicking backwards with his legs.

"Hudson, what the fuck is-" Noticing the private staring over his shoulder, Hicks glanced up and froze, as did the rest of the platoon.

A massive dark shape descended rapidly from the clouds, hitting the ground just a few hundred meters in front of them in an Earth-shaking impact. Then its long, spindly arms unfolded, and the towering Reaper Destroyer got to its feet. The armor plates covering its glowing red firing chamber retracted, and it let out an ear-splitting, brassy roar.

"Holy motherfucker, what _is that thing!?" _Vasquez shouted, raising her smartgun in a futile show of force.

The Reaper's red, eye-like cannon swiveled to face directly at them, and the glow intensified, accompanied by another roar. Hicks realized what was coming a split second before it happened. "MOVE!" He screamed, diving for cover.

With a high-pitched sound, the Thanix weapon discharged, a long beam of molten metal tore apart the ground, leaving a glowing crater in its wake and flinging rock and molten metal in every direction. The rest of the marines dove out of the way, but one of them wasn't quite fast enough.

"AAAAAAAAAAHHHHHHHH!" Wierzbowski screamed as his lower legs were vaporized, caught in the wake of the Reaper weapon, leaving twisted, blackened stumps ringed by inflamed red flesh and half-melted armor just above the knee.

"Dietrich, get him up!" Apone screamed as the Reaper swung its gaze around and the pursuing forces got closer. "Everyone, inside, NOW!"

The squad, their female corpsman carrying the wounded, now-unconscious Wierzbowski with her, ran into what appeared to be some sort of luxury hotel, or at least the remains of one. The furniture, such that it was, was strewn everywhere, and scorch marks and bullet holes covered every available surface. The terrified

marines and civilians barely noticed as they ran through the devastated atrium, past the shattered remains of some fountain, and into the hotel proper. They ran down the hallway until they found some stairs and pounded up them in a rush, barely remembering to assign rear security and to maintain their intervals.

They stopped on the seventh floor, randomly picked a room, and forced the door open. As they secured the room, Apone began issuing orders.

"Dietrich, put him on the table. Do what you can for him." The woman nodded and pulled out her medkit. Apone surveyed the room, it was large, luxurious, a lone tv on one wall, several couches strewn throughout, and a small kitchenette and dining table next to a large, thankfully curtained window.

"All clear sir!" Came the calls from the marines securing the rest of the suite. "Nothing back here but bedrooms and bathrooms!"

"Ok, sweep the place, keep an eye out for anything unusual." The sergeant turned to Bishop and Ripley. "Are you two alright?"

Ripley merely nodded, but the android gingerly raised one arm, which was leaking a milky white fluid from the shoulder. "Just a graze." He reported calmly. "My onboard repair systems can handle it."

"Good," He turned to where Dietrich was frantically injecting stims into Wierzbowski and applying pressure bandages to the ragged, cauterized stumps that used to be his legs. "Now can someone please tell me what the _fuck_ just happened?!"

With Hicks and Hudson off searching the suite, only Vasquez was left. "Drake's dead," She whispered. "Those fucking pendejoes!" She got her feet abruptly, grabbing her massive weapon and moved towards the window. "Get over here _putas_ I'm gonna kill all of you!"

"Hey!" Apone barked. "Stow that attitude Vasquez, and get your ass away from the window or you'll get shot before you can kill any of 'em!"

She reluctantly obeyed the order and returned to her seat, staring at her weapon.

"Drake was a damn fine marine, and he died protecting us." Apone said in a gruff, but still somewhat soothing tone. "And we should honor his sacrifice by figuring out just where in the hell we are and taking the fight to those things!" Vasquez nodded and looked up, a fire in her eyes.

"Yo! Got something here sarge!" Hicks walked in clutching a small blue datapad. "Looks like a mini-computer, but not any kind I've ever seen."

"Did you try accessing it?" Apone asked, taking the device from the corporal.

"Yeah, first thing sir. But it won't respond to anything I-" He stopped as Apone hit a small control on the side and the screen flared to life, displaying some holographic text.

"Hmm," Apone said after a moment, and then read the text out loud. "It's in English. 'We've got to get out of the city.'" He began quietly. "'There are Reapers everywhere. I hear they've been targeting the refugee camps, capturing as many as they want and killing the rest. I can't risk the kids. Honey, I'm going to try and get out of here. If you find this, come meet me where we first met...'" He trailed off.

"Well, that doesn't sound too good." Vasquez commented dryly.

"Yeah, man. What the hell's a Reaper?" Hudson asked. They all turned to the civilian woman sitting quietly on the couch.

Ripley shook herself out of her reverie and looked up at them. "I don't know!" She protested. "I've never seen anything like these things before! I'm just as lost as you are!"

"If I may?" Bishop asked, holding out his hand for the datapad. Apone handed it over, and the android turned the device over in his hands slowly before finding what he was looking for: a circular cable access point. The android dug around in the pockets of his cargo pants, looking for something.

Ripley watched him "it- go with troubled emotions. The machine had pushed her out of the way of an incoming bullet during their retreat, saving her life and wounding itself in the process. She almost thanked it for that. And then she remembered Ash, his face utterly emotionless as he tried to strangle her with a rolled-up wad of magazines aboard the Nostromo and she shook violently. No, she couldn't forgive Bishop for Ash's sins. It was a synthetic, and they couldn't be trusted.

She glanced over at Apone, talking with the squad medic. By the grim looks on their faces, the wounded marine wasn't doing well. She shuddered and glanced around at their luxurious surroundings, wondering where they were and what had happened.

"Ah-ha!" Bishop exclaimed softly, and she noticed that he'd produced a strangely shaped, dual-ended cable. He plugged one end into the datapad, with the specialized jack changing size to fit in the port, and then rolled up his left sleeve.

Confused, Ripley watched, along with the other marines, as Bishop pinched a mole on his left forearm and pulled, yanking the artificial blemish out along with a thin white strand of synthetic flesh. Then he inserted the other end of the cable into the newly exposed hole on his arm.

"Direct link established." The android said tonelessly, his eyelids half-closed and fluttering as he accessed the datapad's contents. "Processing." He quirked an eyebrow. "Fascinating."

"What?" Hudson asked nervously.

"Please wait." Was the reply.

He sat there silently for several minutes before fully opening his eyes and removing the cable from his arm. Turning to face the squad leader, he spoke in a serious tone. "This is very bad, sergeant."

****oOo****

A series of metallic blast doors bearing the Systems Alliance emblem were suddenly split apart by long, bloodstained dark claws. There was a sound of wrenching metal, and a snarling, glowing husk shoved the doors apart. The thing charged, and with a loud boom, its face â€"and most of its head- exploded in a cloud of dark red mist and gore.

Still holding the smoking Carnifex pistol, admiral Hackett coughed in the smoke-filled air, and slumped, placing one hand on the flickering, badly damaged holographic table that was displaying the disastrous battle for the human homeworld. Surrounding the orange globe were thousands of red markers, vastly outnumbering the dwindling blue allied forces.

Hackett glanced around; most of his bridge crew was dead or unconscious. Noxious fumes filled the air, and a massive hole, caused by a direct shot from a Reaper cannon, had torn through the front of the CIC. The shields had slowed it down just enough for the room to survive, but not enough to allow the armor to withstand the hit. Glowing kinetic barriers now separated the rapidly degrading atmosphere of the bridge from the hell raging around the ship.

The rest of the Everest had been ravaged just as badly; a Reaper destroyer had latched onto her underbelly, and punched holes into the hull with its Thanix cannons. Through those rents poured hundreds of reaper monsters, which had moved to quickly seize control of vital areas of the ship. Hackett had purged the computers of any relevant data, but that hadn't stopped them. The first compartment the husks had taken had been the fire control room. He'd only gotten a frenzied transmission from the techs manning the gun controls about horrific creatures pouring through the doors and slaughtering them before the line went dead. And now, they were coming for the bridge.

"Ugh," Hackett raised his left arm, his glowing orange omni-tool flaring to life. "Comms, send a message to the fleet. The dreadnaught Everest is dying, and I don't think I'll make it. My ship's been boarded, and I've scrubbed all mission-sensitive data from the computers, and... I am transferring command of the invasion fleet to Matriarch Kiara aboard the Destiny Ascension. Good luck, and Godspeed." He couldn't get to the escape pods, and even if he did there was no way he could command the battle from one. Assuming of course, that the Reapers didn't blast it out of the sky a few seconds after it launched.

"Sir," The lieutenant on the other end of the line replied. "I feel it is my duty to inform you that no one has been in contact with the Ascension for over an hour now, her last known position was several thousand miles upspin from us, and she was being engaged by multiple Reaper dreadnaughts."

Hackett gave a small sigh, which turned into a hacking cough. This can't be happening. He thought. Sword and Hammer were all but wiped out, no one had seen or heard from commander Shepard; she had vanished sometime after landing. Even with that strange ship, the Enterprise... Hackett's eyelids, previously drooping, snapped completely open. The Enterprise!

"Lieutenant, patch me through to that new ship, the _Enterprise_,
Hackett heard more reaper troops howling close by in the bowels of
his ship. "And hurry."

After a moment, the hologram table Hackett was clutching shimmered,
and the view of the other ship's bridge appeared. Their captain,
Picard, stood from his command chair just below a raised line of
consoles set into a wooden arch, and faced him. "Admiral, are you
alright? What's the situation?"

"Captain," Hackett gasped, the oxygen getting thinner. "I don't have
much time. My ship's been boarded. They- they want to know our plans.
I've destroyed the data, but my crew-" He coughed. "Don't know if we
can win this, don't even know who you are *cough*, but I'm- I'm
giving you command of the fleet. They'll tell you the plan. Please
captain. Don't let me down. *cough*, don't let Earth
down."

oOo

At the helm of the _U.S.S. Enterprise-E_, captain Picard watched as
the grey-haired admiral slumped to the floor on the static-filled
transmission screen, before quickly turning and tapping a control on
the arm of the captain's chair.

"Bridge to transporter room three, do you have a lock on the
admiral's ship?" He asked quickly.

"Yes sir." The young technician responded after a moment.

"Good," Picard said with a barely-noticeable hint of relief in his
voice. "Beam the survivors on that ship aboard immediately. Send the
critically injured to sickbay, and alert doctor Crusher to prepare
for more incoming casualties."

"Yes sir."

oOo

Back aboard the _Everest_, Hackett barely had the energy to lift his
head and see a Marauder, its mechanical eyes glowing white, and the
Phaeston assault rifle fused with the pulsating red flesh of its arm
pointing at him. He struggled, despite his growing weakness and his
rapidly greying-out vision, to raise the pistol in his right hand.
_Not like this. _His mind whispered as the thing raised its arm into
firing position. _Not like this..._

Then there was a burst of light, and his vision
faded.

oOo

"_Sir, the prophet is bugging out, request permission to
engage."_

"_Negative commander, all vectors too heavy for star-side
intercept."_

"_Ma'am! Slipspace rupture off the target's bow; it's gonna jump,
_inside _the city!_"_

"_There's no time sir!"_

"_Green light, green light to engage!"_

"_Punch it! Get us close!"_

"_Ma'am, without a destination solution-"_

"_We are _not_ losing that ship!"_

Commander Miranda Keyes, twenty-six years old and crisp looking with her short-cropped brown hair and grey UNSC service uniform, kept reviewing her conversation with Lord Hood before her jump. Her tiny _Stalwart_-class light frigate, the UNSC _In Amber Clad_ had flown up close next to the massive assault carrier bearing the Prophet of Regret, catching its rippling slipspace wake as the bulbous, purple warship did something no UNSC ship was insane enough to try: an in-atmosphere slipspace jump.

Staring, with bright green eyes out at the blue-tinged blackness of slipspace beyond the bridge's viewport, her eyes widened as out of the oblivion of the other dimension, a white spot appeared in the center of her vision.

"Sensors! What the hell is that?"

Her navigation officer, sitting in front of and slightly to the right of her, stared at his screen and shook his head. "I have no idea, ma'am." He said with a worried note in his voice. "Sensors say it's some sort of gravity anomaly, or what they think is one at least, and its hundreds of kilometers across!"

He was right to worry, though the UNSC had been using slipspace for hundreds of years, they still barely understood the unknown alternate dimension. There were waves, eddies, and other, stranger phenomenon in the darkness of slipspace. Sometimes certain ships would enter a jump and never return, or exit years later, thinking that no time had passed, military warships in close formation would exit slipspace hundreds or thousands of kilometers apart, utterly destroying any sort of strategy for attacking directly after exiting a jump. Unlike the Covenant ships, which could jump wherever they wanted with precision and speed.

However, in all of her (admittedly incomplete) knowledge of slipspace, Miranda had never heard of something like this. And as her ship hurtled on through the blackness at FTL speeds, the white smudge grew until she could see that it was a spiderweb-like patch of white, arcing energy. Miranda didn't know what it was, but staring at the rapidly approaching anomaly, she knew she sure as hell didn't want it anywhere near her ship.

"Helm, maneuver us around it." She ordered.

"Yes ma'am." He responded, tapping a few glowing blue controls, far ahead, the frigate's elongated, split-level bow moved toward the left edge of the now-very large and bright lightning web, but slowly, too slowly. "Ma'am, I can't avoid it!" He shouted after a moment. "She can't move fast enough, impact in thirty seconds!"

Miranda hit a control on the console before her, activating the ship-wide intercom. "All hands, emergency! Brace for impact!"

It was over in seconds, the glowing energy field swept over the _In Amber Clad,_ washing the beige colored hull with electricity. As the field swept through the bridge, Miranda breathed a sigh of relief as it passed through her and her crew without harming them, though she did feel an odd swooping sensation and tingling throughout her nerves.

And then the alarms started.

Sparks flew from the consoles, and some of the screens even exploded in showers of glass and smoke as their systems overloaded. The lighting shifted to red and various klaxons began sounding as the ship suddenly lurched around them, the squeal of protesting metal barely audible over the wailing emergency alarms.

Miranda, clutching the shallow, bleeding cut on her left cheek where a shard of flying glass had sliced her, noticed a couple of consoles actively burning nearby. "Fire, fire in the hold!" She shouted. A nearby bridge member grabbed a fire extinguisher and began dousing the flames with concentrated blasts of white foam.

"Damage report, and kill those God-damned alarms!" Miranda shouted. Outside, the normally smooth darkness of slipspace was twisting, flashing with blue light, and a glance at her sensors showed that they were going utterly crazy.

"Ma'am, our computers and sensors are heavily damaged!" Her sensors tech shouted as the wailing din of the alarms shut off, leaving the bridge eerily silent. "The MAC capacitors have been drained somehow, and the Archer Missile guidance systems aren't responding!"

"Ma'am! The slipspace drive and forward engines are shutting down!" The helmsman shouted, panic in his voice.

Miranda's blood turned to ice in her veins. Mid-jump, non-controlled slipspace terminations were assumed to be death sentences. Those ships vanished, never to be seen again. At least that was what they suspected happened, because no ship that suffered a mid-jump failure had ever returned; ships either came out of slipspace around where they were supposed to, or they didn't come out at all.

"Re-route non-critical power!" She ordered frantically. "Keep the drive online!"

"I can't, ma'am! The control circuits are dead, and one of the reactors has scrambled; coolant pump malfunction. We don't have any power!" The man was in a full-blown panic now, his brown eyes wide. "Termination of jump imminent!"

Miranda felt a calm overtake her. _So this is it, _She thought with finality. _No grand battle, no death by sacrifice, just us vanishing into thin air while chasing that damn carrier. Me, my crew, humanity's last, greatest hope, all gone. This is... Maybe I'll see my father again on the other side._

Out loud, she spoke without a waver in her voice. "Gentlemen, it has been an honor and a privilege to serve alongside you."

"Likewise, ma'am." They replied, though not as calmly.

Then with a shock that wracked the frigate, the oblivion of slipspace seemed to peel back and vanish. Miranda tensed. _What will be on the other side? Is it death, another galaxy, or something worse?_

It was worse; her ship hurtled out of slipspace-

-Into the middle of a hellish battle. Strange, foreign warships and fighters dueling fiercely everywhere her stunned eyes could see, punctuated by explosions, large and small, that popped like fireworks, and streaks of lasers and burning wreckage blasted every which way through the space over a burning, blue and gray planet below.

Miranda took in this whole sight in a fraction of a second, and as her conscious mind reeled from both surviving the disastrous slipspace jump and the massive battle taking place around her, her training took over and she began barking orders.

"Go evasive, now! Helm, full forward power, angle us up and away from the planet and prepare for emergency slipspace jump, I don't care how you do it, just go. Sensors, what the hell is going on out there and where the hell are we?!"

She flinched as a long, blue and white craft, which vaguely resembled a UNSC frigate, although with more graceful lines, swept in from the left, firing small turrets and a forward-facing bow cannon at something she couldn't see "and detonated as a glowing red beam of energy tore through the ship's belly, tearing the alien warship apart in a blast of yellow and orange fire and flinging molten debris around it. Her frigate shuddered as the shockwave of fire and shrapnel caught it, causing the massive, Titanium-A plated ship to shudder from bow to stern.

"Ma'am, we still have no power for the engines!" The helmsman shouted, frantically working his console. "And the astrogation computer's completely fried, it doesn't know where we are!"

"Sensors, who or what is that out there, and are there any Covenant!" She shouted as two fighters, one a sphere with a glowing red 'front' and an angular, swift-looking thing blew over the bow of her ship, the spherical one smoking from the blue-streaked gunfire coming from its pursuer. "And get me some damn weapons!"

"Sensors building image!" The lieutenant responded, as a glowing, spherical hologram appeared in front of her, rapidly filling up with various contacts, each one tagged with a serial number. "MAC capacitors are still charging, the Archer pods are a write off, and we've already used our Shiva back at Earth!"

"What the hell's left!?" Miranda shouted as another warship, of similar make to the one that had just been destroyed, swept in over the top of her ship, firing its bow gun repeatedly at a shadowy form barely visible through the slowly dispersing debris field ahead of her. In the distance, the battle raged on, more explosions constantly mushrooming over the star-strewn background.

"Just the fifty-millimeters." He replied. "And their precision-targeting computers are shot!"

"Well open them up and-"

She cut herself off as her ship suddenly rang from multiple impacts and kicked to the left. "What the hell was that?!"

"Impact on the starboard engine pods." The helmsman said grimly. "The armor took the hit, it felt like kinetic rounds." He glanced at her, a grim look on his face. "Well, they know we're here now."

_Kinetic rounds. _Miranda thought with a jolt. _Covenant don't use those, but the Innies do. Did we jump into the middle of an Insurrectionist battle? But where'd they get all of these ships and why make them look like that? And what the hell are they fighting?_

Suddenly a red beam blasted through the remains of the first frigate-sized ship and hit the ship hovering just overhead and in front of her vessel. It sheared off one of the ship's strangely undersized engine pods in a flash of orange fire. Miranda barely noticed, though, as a _massive _form flew through the cloud of metal in front of them, glowing red like a demon out of hell, resembling a huge, grasping hand, and the color-

Miranda's eyes narrowed. _That color. _Purple. Iridescent purple. _Covenant._

"Covenant!" Her sensors officer shouted in alarm. "Covenant warship directly off the bow! Unknown design and classification!"

"Fire control, target that warship with everything we have! And get me my damn MAC cannon!" As she watched, the bulky 50 mm autocannons rotated forward and fired a stream of hot lead at the Covenant ship, which based on its size was a cruiser or battleship. Thousands of rounds flew from the barrels, with the occasional yellow streak of a tracer round showing the direction of the others.

The shots impacted a glowing blue barrier that flashed into existence to intercept the rounds. Miranda frowned slightly, something tickling the back of her mind. _That's not right; Covenant shields are silver, not blue..._

Then the 'hand' opened up, the tendrils at the front of the warship unfolding like some perverse flower, and a large port on the underside of the ship began to glow red.

Realizing what was coming, Miranda gripped her chair and shouted at the top of her voice. "Oh shit, brace for impact!"

A streak of bright red flew from the warship and with little more than a shudder, cut cleanly through the armor plating on the _Amber's _bow, slicing a jagged, diagonal glowing tear into the armor. As the crew watched, horrified, the two chunks of severed metal from the forward bow, the site of the cut glowing orange and yellow, spun away into space, venting atmosphere. Their MAC gun was now disabled.

In that instant, Miranda realized that they were completely outmatched in space, and that the Covenant warship would destroy them

easily. Without engines or their slipspace drive-

"I'm initiating Cole Protocol Article Two, we're evacuating! Set the cannons to a defensive firing pattern, scrub the astrogation computer, and evacuate!" She ordered her crew.

"Yes ma'am!" They replied quickly tapping their controls. Outside, the turrets rotated to face out and began laying down random patterns of gunfire, trying to establish a buffer zone to allow the crew to escape. Several of the shots reached out to hit the encroaching Reaper Dreadnaught, doing little more than ping off of its kinetic barriers.

"All hands, this is the commander, evacuate the ship immediately!" Miranda bellowed into the intercom. "Move, get to the Longswords and Pelicans and head for the planet below!" She paused and switched channels.

"Chief," She addressed the SPARTAN-II supersoldier. "Get to an HEV pod and get the hell out, protect Cortana!"

"Understood." Was the cyborg's gruff response.

Suddenly there was another flash of red light, and that beam weapon flew by the bridge. The In Amber Clad kicked and bucked, shaking the crew in their seats. A wash of orange fire flew past the bridge's left side. "What was that?!"

"We've just lost the portside engine." One of the techs reported grimly. "We've got fire spreading throughout the portside aft quarter, and the radiation alarms are going nuts!"

"Longswords and Pelicans away!" One of the other five officers shouted. "All personnel accounted for!" She added after a moment. "There are still some HEV pods left, but we have to hurry, ma'am."

"Alright, we've overstayed our welcome, send the distress signal and let's go!" Miranda shouted, getting to her feet despite the ship shuddering from multiple kinetic impacts to the ship's Titanium-A armor.

"Yes, ma'am, there's a lot of encrypted chatter and interference out there, so I don't know if it'll be heard." The comms officer said, working his controls frantically. "Done." He ran to the rear of the bridge where the rest of the crew was waiting in the elevator.

Miranda glanced back at the sensors officer, still standing over his station. "Lieutenant, get your ass back here!"

"Ma'am, there's another UNSC ship out there!" He said, disbelief evident in his voice.

"I don't care!" Miranda shouted as the disintegrating ship shook again. "We have to leave!"

"Wait," He said, staring hard at the screen. "It's a light cruiser, Halcyon-class. Transponder reads as the-" He shook his head. "No, that's impossible."

"Lieutenant!" Miranda bellowed. Her hand hovered over the button to send the main lift down to the HEV launch bays.

He turned to start for the rear of the bridge, when with the sound of a muted explosion and tearing metal, several hyper-velocity rounds tore through the bridge. The lieutenant didn't even have time to shout or realize what happened, as his body veritabily evaporated into a red, bloody mist, which was quickly sucked out through the ragged breaches in the hull, accompanying the scream of escaping air.

"Shit!" Miranda yelled, slamming her hand down on the lift button. The doors closed swiftly and the lift started down at a fast clip.

"Sweet Jesus," One of the Navy officers gulped, putting his hands on his knees. "Lieutenant Agathon, he, he."

"Don't dwell on it." Miranda ordered. "He disobeyed a direct order, and paid the price." Inwardly she winced at that, but she couldn't go back on herself, especially not in a life-or-death situation.

"Ma'am, with all due respect-" The lift dinged at that moment, and the doors opened onto a dimly lit, olive drab corridor lined with hatches on the right side.

"Stow the chatter and let's go!" Miranda ordered, rushing out of the lift and waving her officers after her. "Go, go, go!"

They ran for the HEV pods and practically dove into them, sealing both hatches behind them and launching without any hesitation. One last officer ran toward Miranda where she stood near the last two pods, the commander's arm outstretched-

-And then the bulkhead behind and to the left of the lieutenant exploded inward. A tear was opened up through the Titanium-A armor, exposing a portion of the _In Amber Clad's_ superstructure through the hole, the metal glowing red-hot from the beam weapon. With a scream, lieutenant Janeway was thrown towards the gaping breach and the war-torn void beyond by the sudden rush of air out the gap. Miranda, clutching the edge of the pod hatch, could only watch as the young woman caught the edge of the glowing, jagged tear, struggling to pull herself back in against the diminishing wind as the pressure rapidly bled out of the hull tear.

Then, with a muted shriek in the nearly gone atmosphere, the jagged metal in the officer's hands cut deeply into the woman's palms, and her blood fountained out, flying out into space. Then, the lieutenant lost her blood-slicked grip on the edge and flew out into the silent, raging emptiness beyond. Seconds later a stray Thanix cannon blast caught the officer's slowly struggling and choking form, and vaporized her instantly.

Miranda Keyes pulled herself into the cramped pod, the atmosphere almost gone and her ears and eyes burning from the pressure difference, and slammed a hand on the glowing red button marked 'Emergency Launch'. With a barely-audible hiss, both the pod's door and the frigate's hatch slammed down, and with a roar, air flooded

the tiny pod. The commander gasped in relief at the sweet rush of oxygen, and struggled, despite a sudden weakness, to get herself into the pod's seat. She pulled the straps around her shaking form, buckling them in as the pod clanked and whirred into launch position.

"Come on!" Miranda screamed, slamming her hands against the sides of the pod, near where the shotgun and submachine gun were secured.

With a bone-jarring jolt, a small explosive jolt fired the pod out of the lower hull of the dying UNSC frigate. Miranda was slammed up against the restraining harness. She stared up through the glass viewport on the front of the drop pod at the In Amber Clad. She felt a slight pang of sadness through the haze of adrenaline and fear at the twisted, melted hulk that used to be her ship. It barely resembled the once-proud frigate it had once been; one of the engine pods had been blown off, the hull was rent in countless places, and atmosphere and fire vented from those gaps. As she watched, three more red beams sliced into the ship and cut it into pieces, detonating the remaining fuel and ordinance in bright white explosion.

Commander Keyes slumped in her seat, putting her face in her hands and letting out a shuddering breath. It'd barely been ten minutes and she'd already lost her ship, a good portion of her crew, and almost died herself. She looked up and out the window, down towards the planet below. She could barely make out the tiny pinpricks of light from the other pods' engines as they flew towards the planet below. She closed her eyes. Although there weren't many warships below her, in these pods she and her crew were practically defenseless.

She looked down at the planet again, and her eyes widened. That peninsula! She thought wildly. No, no, no, it can't be...

Then the HEV shook, and a wreath of orange and yellow fire erupted around the bottom of her pod.

She was entering the planet's upper atmosphere.

****oOo****

"So, where do we stand?" Captain Jacob Keyes asked from the bridge of the Halcyon-Class cruiser the Pillar of Autumn over the shouting of the various officers around him. Cortana would filter and condense the information into short, concise statements and bring the necessary information to his attention if necessary.

"Our fighter patrols are mopping up the last of the encroaching fighters, nothing serious." Cortana's feminine voice echoed throughout the spacious room. "But my sensors are picking up approach signatures from multiple unknown warships. And in a few minutes they'll be all over us."

"Alright, what about that planet? Do you know where we are?" The grey-haired captain asked, staring at a tactical projection of the situation and holding his antique pipe in one hand.

"Just a moment," She replied, then her glowing, blue holographic avatar appeared.

She was an attractive young woman with short hair and clad in a skin-tight jumpsuit with lines of code running down her form, and she looked up at him seriously. "Captain, I'm reading another UNSC ship out there in this mess."

"Who?" Keyes asked, interested. They were surrounded on all sides by unknown warships fighting a massive battle, explosions breaking all around them. The Pillar of Autumn hung above the planet in a small bubble of calm, established by their heavy fighter-interceptors, although the approaching warships were threatening to change that.

They'd been fleeing from the dying planet Reach through slipspace when they encountered an unknown anomaly, resembling a web of white lightning. It had swept over the ship, destroying some minor electrical systems. Luckily Cortana had been able to redirect the unusual surge's energy into non-critical systems, saving critical portions of the ship. Unfortunately the phenomenon had interacted badly with their slipspace drive, catapulting them into orbit around this burning, grayish planet and into a fight for their lives. Fighters and frigate-size ships roared around them, dozens of different models all attacking a significantly larger force of ominously purple warships, reminiscent of Covenant cruisers. Barely a few minutes after arriving their Longswords were launched and struggling to establish a buffer zone and the bridge was in chaos.

"Sir..." The AI said with a slight hesitation unusual to constructs. "The other UNSC ship, it's the In Amber Clad."

Keyes' eyes went wide as he stared out at the mass of warships slugging it out, and the multicolored streaks of light flashing through the emptiness of space as a wedge of fear lodged itself in his gut. Miranda. "What the- Cortana, where are they?"

"A few thousand kilometers to port." She paused again. "Sir, she just activated an emergency beacon!"

"Cortana, plot an intercept course, now!" He shouted, praying that he wasn't too late. Outside the view shifted as the Autumn's massive engines ponderously spun up to speed, projecting huge streamers of blue-white plasma behind the blocky warship. They started to move, but slowly, too slowly...

"It's too late," The AI said with an undertone of sadness before the ship's engines even began to build up speed. "The frigate has been destroyed." A bright flash shone out of the left side of the bridge, brighter than the other, background explosions that were omnipresent above the planet; the In Amber Clad's funeral pyre, and her crew's. "I'm sorry, Captain."

"Dammit." Keyes muttered, his eyes tearing up slightly as he struggled to maintain control. No, not Miranda. Please not her. What the hell was she even doing here?

"Sir," Cortana said, snapping him out of it. "I don't want to give you false hope, but I've detected a large number of Longswords, Pelicans, and HEV pods heading for the planet's surface. It's possible she survived." She added helpfully.

Hope surged in his chest, countering the sadness, but he forced both emotions down. Not now, Captain Keyes thought, steadying himself. You have a ship to lead. "Alright, Cortana, which faction attacked her ship?"

"I believe it was the larger, better-armed faction, sir." She replied. "And of all the factions in this battle, they are the only ones to have displayed active hostility towards us."

"Alright, designate all vessels of that make as hostiles and commence targeting. Have you managed to crack their communications?"

"Not yet sir," She said sheepishly, slightly embarrassed of the fact. "They're comms protocols and operating systems are unlike anything I've ever seen. I can't get into the networks on either side of the conflict, in fact."

"Well, what can you tell me about them?" Keyes asked, watching as the red dots on the tactical view crept closer to his ship, vector and speed information displayed next to each one.

"The ones we've designated as hostile are very large warships and heavily armed. I'm not detecting any of the energy shielding that comes standard with most Covenant vessels of that size, however our gravity sensors go crazy whenever we point them at the warships; there's something strange going on there. Also, they aren't using standard Covenant Battle-Nets, otherwise I could crack it with ease."

'She' looked up at him, even though Cortana's true eyes were the myriad sensors and cameras scattered throughout the ship, she found that humans tended to react better if her avatar appeared to interact with them directly.

"Captain, despite their appearance I don't think we're dealing with the Covenant here, they're just too different. The other warships that they are fighting have more in common with them than us, but are much smaller than the hostiles, and they have thinner hulls and possess weaker weaponry. It's weaker than both the hostiles' guns and our own as a matter of fact." Left unsaid was the question of if these factions weren't Covenant or humans, then who the hell were they?

"What about the planet?" Keyes asked as the unknown warships grew closer, both as blips on the screen and shadowy figures beyond the bridge viewport. "Do you know where we are?"

Cortana then did something that surprised the captain. Although she was cloned from a human brain and had adopted some human mannerisms, he had never seen an AI bite their lip and raise a hand to their face in contemplation and uncertainty.

Deep within the mind of the massive, unfathomable computer intelligence that was Cortana, dozens of processes suddenly screeched to a halt as they analyzed the data coming in from the sensor feeds and telescopes, the AI equivalent of a person's heart skipping a beat in shock. Cortana, developed from the flash-cloned brain tissue of doctor Katherine Halsey, mastermind of the SPARTAN supersoldier program, was, for the first time in her short life, utterly shocked.

For a half a processing cycle she was stunned as she reviewed the data and re-scanned the planet, struggling to find some other explanation for what she was seeing.

_The coastline matches up within exceptional deviations, the atmosphere has the right proportions, _She thought, trying to be empirical about the situation. _And, oh hell, the moon's the exact same. _There was no other explanation for it, she concluded.

They were at Earth.

A second after he asked her that last question, Cortana responded. "Captain, if I'm reading the data right, we... are at Earth."

Silence, save for the ringing alarms in the background, descended over the bridge. Every officer turned almost simultaneously from their consoles and stared out of the glass at the front of the bridge at the devastated planet before them.

"Earth..." Captain Keyes said after a moment. "Mother of God." _It's all been for nothing. _He thought, temporarily forgetting the situation he was in as the shock from his and every other UNSC members' worst nightmare set in. _The Cole Protocol, all of our precautions, our fleets, and we still couldn't save our own homeworld._

Around him, some of the other bridge members were whispering, a few prayed, many swore, but the majority was silent, frozen in horror, as they watched their homeworld burn.

"Sir," Cortana said. "Might I remind you that due to the slipspace anomaly, it's doubtful we are at Earth as we know it. And those warships are closing in!"

Keyes snapped himself out of his funk at her words and began issuing orders. "Alright, snap out of it people, we're still UNSC officers and we have a job to do! Stand to your stations and bring the ship up to combat alert alpha!"

The bridge exploded back into activity as the officers began frantically shouting orders and using their consoles. Keyes turned back to the AI's pedestal.

"Cortana, can we destroy those ships coming towards us?" He asked seriously.

"I'm not sure." She replied, as one of the encroaching warships fired a beam of red energy from the tip of one of its tendrils. It impacted a warship with a circular bow and an odd, segmented body, bristling with guns, and blew it in half. Keyes winced. _How many were on that ship? _He wondered. _Were they humans, or someone else? And what is this Earth like? Are we in the future?_ There were so many questions, and no time to answer them.

"I think they possess some form of shielding based on gravity distortion, and they are armed with magnetic guns, missiles, and whatever that red attack was, it appeared to be some sort of stream of liquid metal, accelerated to incredible speed. Also, our sensors indicate that they have some sort of UV-based laser system for

point-defense."

She filed those tidbits away for later. Assuming she survived, such weapons could be a boon to the beleaguered human race, back home in their own Universe, which was in desperate need of something, anything, to turn the tide against the Covenant. She could only guess at the power requirements needed for such weaponry though.

"Given those odds, I'm fairly certain we can kill them all, but there are hundreds of those warships within sensor range, and who knows how many more beyond it. I'm good, captain, but I'm not_ that_ good." She added, trying to inject a bit of humor into the situation. "And whoever, or whatever is opposing them, well they're not putting up that good of a fight." As if to punctuate her statement another, brighter, explosion blossomed nearby.

"Is there any chance of getting away through slipspace?" Keyes asked as the incoming ships entered extreme weapons range. The Longswords broke away from them, fleeing back to the _Autumn._ The pilots recognized an unstoppable opponent when they saw one.

"Negative, the Shaw-Fujikawa is completely slagged, we'll need to rebuild it from scratch." She replied, another part of her mind energizing the MAC capacitors to prepare to fire.

"Very well, so this is where we make our stand." Keyes said firmly, realizing that with no FTL they'd have to stand their ground and fight, and against so many enemies... "I am initiating Cole Protocol Article Two, we are abandoning the _Autumn._" _For all the good the Protocol does us now._ A small thought said, but he ruthlessly brushed it aside. "We're going to bust through that line and land as many troops as we can on the planet, and continue fighting up here for as long as we can."

Stunned, the bridge crew didn't even react. Keyes turned to the AI pedestal and added. "That means you're leaving too, Cortana. I'll stay here and provide cover fire while you escape."

"While you do what sir, go down with the ship?!" She protested as the huge vessel shuddered. Above their heads, the massive electromagnets discharged in sequence, firing three titanic slugs of metal out of the front of the warship at a decent fraction of the speed of light. They streaked through the war-torn and debris-strewn space above Earth and impacted the lead Reaper warship's barriers, not punching through but severely weakening them.

"In a manner of speaking," Keyes replied. "Once we've done all we can up top, I'll bring the _Autumn_ in for a crash-landing on the planet's surface and we'll link up with you and the survivors from _In Amber Clad._"

"With all due respect, sir, humanity has _enough_ dead heroes!" She protested, at the same time reloading the MAC and locking in targeting solutions on the approaching ships for the Archer pods.

"I appreciate the concern, Cortana, but it's not up to me." He said sadly, crossing his arms as he heard a metallic _thumping_ growing closer from behind him. "Protocol is clear; capture or destruction of a shipboard AI is absolutely unacceptable, no matter if we're at- no matter where we are." He didn't want to say out loud that they were

at Earth, not until he was absolutely sure it actually was. "That means you're abandoning ship. We'll stay up here and fight for as long as we can, but with all those warships around... "

He trailed off as Cortana nodded. "Very well, upload a selection of landing sites near where the _In Amber Clad's _survivors touched down to the Pelicans and the escape pods, save a copy to my neural lace, and prepare for a hard transfer. Once all the escape vehicles are away and we've expended the last of the ship's ordinance, we'll crash-land on the planet's surface and link up with you."

"Aye-aye, sir." She said sadly, vanishing.

_We can't retreat, and in space we can only hold out for so long before we're overwhelmed. At least on the ground we can wage a guerrilla campaign and maybe get a lift off of Ear- this rock. _Keyes thought, trying to organize his chaotic thoughts. _Hell, the Chief even has a reputation for pulling off impossible stunts like this._

He turned to the newly arrived, hulking, seven-foot tall cyborg in question, who was standing silently behind him, and stared up at his reflection in the green-armored man's golden visor.

"Which is where you come in, Chief." He'd sent for the Spartan almost immediately after they'd arrived in the warzone, but there'd been some delays with getting him out of the cryo bay. "Get Cortana off of this ship, and keep her safe from the enemy. If they capture her, they'll learn everything: force deployments, weapons research." He'd been about to add 'Earth', but if Cortana was right then that wasn't exactly a secret anymore.

"Yes sir, I understand." The Master Chief said in a low voice. He was wearing bulky, angular green armor and a fully sealed helmet. Underneath the separate, hard ceramic and metal plating was a black, resilient, full-body suit, which was resistant to gunfire and knives. "Who are we fighting sir? And where are we?" The Chief asked after a moment, turning his head to stare at the burning planet below, and the rapidly approaching Reaper warships.

Behind his visor, his eyes narrowed at the strange design of the Reaper vessels, and the planet behind them. It was still far off, but it grew steadily larger as the cruiser's massive engines pushed her slowly but surely towards it.

"Cortana can fill you in on the details later." The captain replied. "Right now what's important is that you evacuate and get to safety, the both of you." Cortana's holographic avatar reappeared. "Are you ready?" He asked her

"Just about," The AI replied. "I've copied some of my core code to the ship's mainframe, it'll continue evasive maneuvers and assist with fire control until you take her in." The ship rocked, not from the MAC gun firing, but from projectiles fired from the warships impacting the cruiser's heavy armor. "Not that you'll listen, but I'd recommend having my subroutines handle the final approach."

"Outstanding, Cortana. Thank you." The captain said, popping his pipe into his mouth.

She took one last, almost sad look around at her temporary home. "Alright, yank me." The captain knelt, quickly ejected the memory chip holding the AI, and handed it to the Chief.

"Good luck, Master Chief."

Chief nodded, took the chip, and slip it carefully into the slot at the back of his helmet, momentarily feeling a strange sensation, as if cold, liquid metal was flowing through his brain, before Cortana spoke through his helmet's internal speakers.

"Hmm, your architecture isn't that much different from the _Autumn's._"

"Don't get any funny ideas."

Chief re-focused on the captain standing in front of him. The naval officer pulled out a gleaming, silver M6D handgun and offered it to him. Chief took it, and vaguely heard the captain start to mention not having any ammunition for it, but his attention was caught by something else.

Out beyond the glass at the front of the bridge, one of the big, dark Reaper ships had managed to close the distance between itself and the UNSC vessel, shying off to the side and remaining out of the MAC gun's tight firing arc. Even as the fat yellow streaks of archer missiles raced out towards it, the squid-like warship pointed a tendril at the _Autumn_ that began glowing red with charging energy. More specifically, the weapon was aimed directly at the exposed and vulnerable bridge on the underside of the Halcyon-class ship's bow, and at _him._

"Chief!" Cortana shouted a fraction of a second after he realized what was coming. The Master Chief knew what to do, even as adrenaline flooded his system and his artificial, inhuman reflexes activated.

Spartan Time kicked in.

Everything seemed to stand still, the flashing lights, the other crewmen, the blaring alarms, even the rapidly coalescing energy on the tip of the dreadnaught's tentacle all seemed to just _stop._ The Master Chief took a single step forward, grabbed the still-unaware captain around the middle with his free hand, and hefted him under his left arm. As Keyes' expression slowly turned to one of surprise and he started to bellow in shock, the Chief pivoted towards the rear of the bridge and ran for the safety of the bowels of the vessel, passing slowly-reacting crewmen like statues. They were dead already, they just didn't know it, even as they slowly turned to stare at where the Spartan had been standing an instant earlier. Behind him, the Reaper's cannon had finished charging, and the beam of molten metal rocketed out towards the unarmored bridge, which the thing's sensors had identified as a vulnerability in the hull.

The weapon, which even to the Spartan was ungodly fast, streaked towards the bridge. The two helmsman, sitting out in a sort of bubble of glass at the very fore of the command deck, barely had time to react as glowing red death filled their vision. The Thanix shot blew through the glass, instantly vaporizing the two men before they could

even scream in shock. The intense heat flash-ignited the atmosphere, creating a rolling fireball that filled the remainder of the room and incinerated the other officers. The Master Chief, having turned the corner after passing the free-standing wall at the end of the bridge, ran for the blast doors that were quickly closing, still carrying Keyes under his arm. At his back, the fire blossomed around the corner he'd just turned, while the molten metal, not slowed down in the least, blew through the back of the bridge and continued to penetrate the _Autumn_, causing monumental damage and gutting half of the ship.

"You're cutting it close!" Cortana shouted directly into his mind as the Chief hurtled the captain through the almost-closed doors and jumped through after him. He rolled into the dive, and managed to wrap his body around Keyes' with his back to the door just as a jet of fire roared through the gap in the blast doors towards them.

Normal time returned.

With a roar the fire wreathed the prone Spartan, flaring against his energy shields and causing them to drain almost instantaneously, while even through his armor Chief felt an unbearable heat that made his skin blister. The air around him shimmered from the inferno raging from the doors.

And then, with a hiss, the blast shields closed, cutting off the fire. Simultaneously the ship rocked from side to side and new alarms began sounding. Ignoring the pain and the alert of his armor warning him of depleted shields, he stood slowly, his armor smoking, to stare down at the captain.

His skin was an angry red, his hair was slightly singed, and he was coughing in the smoke-laden atmosphere, but Keyes was alive.

"What â€"cough- what the hell just happened, Chief?" He asked, getting shakily to his feet. "What-"

"They took out the bridge, sir." Chief said, staggering as another powerful blast rocked the ship. Keyes put a hand to the wall to steady himself and looked at the blast doors now sealing off the bridge, which glowed an angry red color. Smoke was issuing from the paint on the door as it began to crisp off.

"How-" Another blast, larger than the others, wracked the ship, and then Cortana's voiced blared over the Chief's external speakers.

"Captain, the MAC cannon is offline, that was my last real offensive option. We have to evacuate, _now!_"

"Alright, Cortana." Keyes said, dusting off his dress uniform. "Give the evacuation code signal!"

With no further discussion he and the Chief took off running down the corridor, the ship shaking around them, and headed for the closest lifeboats. Meanwhile, Cortana's voice began playing from the loudspeakers all over the ship. "Attention all hands, this is Cortana, abandon ship, abandon ship immediately! This is not a drill, I repeat: this is _not_ a drill." On the way to the lifeboats, the

Chief slapped the still-warm pistol to his magnetic thigh-plate and grabbed an assault rifle and a bandolier of ammo off of a nearby rack.

"Sir, we're still far away from the planet," Chief pointed out as they rounded a corner and beheld several marines frantically boarding the escape craft. "What's to stop them from blowing us out of the sky?"

"I have an idea on that Chief." Keyes replied, head for the nearest open hatch. "Cortana, can you remotely pilot the _Autumn_ from a lifeboat?"

"Yes, sir." She responded through the Chief's helmet's external speakers. "But I don't see..."

"We're going to use her as a shield." Keyes replied grimly, clambering through the Bumblebee's hatch. "Remote pilot her and keep the _Autumn_ between us and those capital ships. The Longswords can handle the rest." He sat down and strapped himself into a chair.

The Chief stopped by the hatch and looked back quickly. Explosions rocked the corridors as the ship rang like a bell from hit after hit from the unknown warships. It seemed Cortana had been too optimistic about their chances about killing all the enemy warships. One last marine ran towards the pod, even as the others launched. Suddenly he tripped and fell, his gun flying from his hands.

"Oh no," The man whimpered. "Oh no!" He feared he would be left behind.

Slightly disgusted, the Chief reached down and grabbed the marine by the collar and bodily threw him through the hatch behind him. "Now would be a _very_ _good_ time to leave!" Cortana shouted at him.

He stepped back into the pod and slammed a palm down on a glowing red button. The twin set of doors closed in front of him, and with an explosion the escape vehicle was fired out of its berth. It flew quickly away from the dying cruiser, propelled by four engines at the corners of the blocky craft. Behind them the true extent of the damage became clear as they beheld a plethora of burning patches and gaping breaches in the ship's hull, which vented atmosphere. Wreckage surrounded the ship, glinting softly in the sunlight.

"We're disengaged, going for minimum safe distance!" The female pilot's voice came in over the radio from the front of the tiny craft.

"We're going to make it, right sir?" One of the marines asked fearfully as the pilot maneuvered their tiny vessel to take up position under the warship's belly, where all the other escape craft were huddled, shepherded by the Longsword fighters. "I don't wanna die out here!"

"We'll be fine, son." Captain Keyes reassured the terrified man. "We've made it this far."

"Look! The _Autumn_,_ she's turning!" Another marine shouted, and he was right.

Above and behind them, the flaming, heavily damaged cruiser, with numerous holes punched in her armor, ponderously turned and lumbered towards the planet after her wayward crew. Streams of tracer rounds flew from her fifty-millimeter cannons, so many it actually looked like she was shooting golden lasers instead of lead, towards the Reaper warships which threatened her children. Archer missiles flew from their launchers in droves, streaking out on yellow pillars of flame towards the three Reaper warships circling the dying ship, only to explode far away from their hulls as the invisible, UV lasers found them.

The dreadnaughts fired repeatedly, red beams gouging away at the massive cruiser and carving huge tears of metal out of her, and yet the Pillar of Autumn fought on. It was a testament to the resilience of the Halcyon line of cruisers that despite losing most of her armor, and in some places being more empty space than hull, streams of munitions still flew from recessed mounts on her hull. And as long as she kept fighting, the Reapers would be forced to focus on her, and not her fleeing crew.

Chief watched the cruiser buy them time in silence, not even wanting to guess how Cortana was managing to control the ship from his battle suit, until she sighed over his speakers.

"Well, that's about all I can do." She said quietly.

"What, that's it?" Chief said with a slight teasing tone. "It's barely been five minutes!"

"I- I might have underestimated the enemy warships' offenses." Cortana said sheepishly as the burning ship fell away behind them, the escaping ships pulling away from the dying cruiser. "And that's not exactly it, I've still got one trick up my sleeve."

"What?"

In response, the Autumn turned ponderously towards the nearest dreadnaught and her remaining engines sputtered to life, pushing her closer to the Reaper ship. The purple thing's thrusters, located on the underside of its 'mantle' came online, moving it out of the way of the slow UNSC ship.

"You're going to miss." The Chief remarked, watching the scene unfold.

"Who said anything about ramming them?" Cortana replied cheekily.

The Pillar of Autumn shook from bow to stern, and a massive white detonation exploded out of her aft section, mushrooming into a giant white sphere, miles across, that engulfed the Reaper ship entirely, vaporizing it. Chief raised a hand against the intensity of the light, which faded away. When he could see again, Chief noted impassively that the cruiser had been destroyed, as had the Reaper ship, and its two fellows were cautiously moving away from where the two ships had been.

The Master Chief looked over his shoulder, and saw Keyes and the other marines and naval officers staring out the back with shocked and slightly downcast expressions. He didn't really understand why,

it was just a ship after all, but after many years serving aboard spaceships, he'd learned that their crews tended to get rather attached to their ships, even assigning them personalities. So, when everyone in the cramped hold silently saluted the destroyed ship, he turned and did so as well, out of respect for them and for the ship that had been sacrificed to save their lives.

"I sent the reactors into a wildcat meltdown shortly after we launched and it became clear how badly I was outmatched." Cortana explained softly as he dropped his salute. "It was the only way to kill those ships with no nukes left and the MAC offline."

"It's alright." Chief replied, staring out the back. A little below the lower edge of the window that covered the back of the escape pod, a sliver of the planet became visible, lit up by the distant sun. "Cortana, where are we exactly?"

"If I'm right, Chief, then we're at Earth." She said carefully, wondering what his reaction would be.

"Earth." He repeated, hefting his assault rifle in a lowered, diagonal grip.

"A version of it, at least." Cortana explained quickly. "When we were in slipspace, we encountered some sort of anomaly which brought us here. I don't have all the facts yet, but I think this is an alternate Universe."

Chief didn't respond, he didn't really have anything to say further. Despite Cortana's alternate Universe hypothesis, his duty was clear: serve and protect Earth and her colonies. Earth was under attack, and he would do his best to defend it. He glanced out of the rear window again, and his gaze narrowed. Something tiny was flashing against the backdrop of stars, and it was growing closer.

"Captain-" He began, when suddenly red projectiles flashed from the approaching starfighters, exploding in clouds of flak all around them.

The escape pod slammed from side to side with every blast, throwing the passengers around in their seats. The Master Chief remained standing, his magnetic boots anchoring him to the floor and his muscles and armor keeping him rock-steady. One blast caught a nearby lifeboat and engulfed it in flames, causing the ship to spin downward out of control.

"Go evasive!" Captain Keyes ordered from his seat.

"I'm trying, sir. But I'm not exactly nimble here!" The pilot replied, trying to use the pod's minimal maneuvering jets to evade the hail of gunfire. The escape pod wasn't designed to actively dodge enemy fighters.

More explosions rocked the tiny ship, even as the Pelicans peeled away toward the planet, bearing troops, Warthogs, and in a couple of cases; Scorpion tanks. The Bumblebees darted around as best they could, but the bulbous craft were easy targets for the Occuli pursuers. The Longsword fighters broke wide to turn and engage the enemy, but they were moving slowly as they turned. Momentum didn't just vanish.

Aboard the escape pod, the Master Chief got a good look at the things killing off the other UNSC personnel. They were metallic and spherical, with a large red dome for a nose and a few prongs extending forward from the edges. One drew up behind them, and its nose began glowing, obviously in preparation to fire. The pilot noticed and tried to throw the ship into a spin, but the Bumblebee reacted slowly, too slowly.

In a last, futile gesture, the Chief brought his assault rifle up to his shoulder and assumed a firing stance. He knew that small arms wouldn't have any effect on the thing and that his actions would cause the atmosphere of the pod to vent out, killing the passengers, but to him they were all dead already, and he at least wanted to go down fighting.

He slid his finger inside the trigger guard and prepared to fire-

And suddenly there was a flash of green light from behind their pursuer, flames erupted from the back of the fighter, and the red glow flickered and died. As the fighter spun down and away from the rear of the craft, Chief beheld their rescuer.

It was an odd-looking craft. A spherical cockpit, with a massive forward window crisscrossed with metallic girders that made it look uncannily similar to an eye, sat between two large, elongated, vertical side panels. The panels 'split' on either side of the cockpit, and each split section tapered to a point that was tipped in what, to the Chief's augmented vision, had to be a cannon of some sort. The entire, odd-looking construct was made primarily of a blue-gray metal, although the 'wings' of the craft were mostly made of a glossy black material, with the metal providing support.

Through the cockpit window, the Master Chief's eyes could barely make out a dark figure sitting at the controls. Whoever they were, they appeared humanoid. A second passed, the fighter still trailing behind the escape craft as they descended towards the upper atmosphere. Slowly, the Chief took his right hand off of his assault rifle, which he'd lowered, and brought it up in a salute to the unknown pilot that had saved their lives.

Much to the Chief's surprise, the fighter slowed down a bit, putting some distance between it and the pod, then very deliberately rolled itself from side-to-side, 'wagging its wings'. Then the fighter promptly peeled off, ascending swiftly back into the chaos of the battle in orbit.

As the Chief turned back to face the confused and stunned expressions of the occupants of the pod, feeling the jolt as the craft began descending through the atmosphere, one thing dominated his thoughts.

If we survive this, I'm going to find that pilot, whoever or whatever they are, and buy them drinks until they pass out.

oOo

As Major Soontir Fel flew away from the alien escape pod in his TIE Interceptor, he felt a strange sort of pride in himself. He'd diverted his squadron to assist them after observing their battle for survival from afar. He knew he'd catch hell for it later, but getting to see that soldier standing there, a gun clutched in their hands, defiant to the end, had been worth it. And they'd saluted him, and surprised, he could only reciprocate the gesture in his own fighter. He sighed inside of his confining black helmet. Perhaps when this was all over, they'd meet somewhere. He'd love to learn their story, no matter what species they were. If they were anything like that one he'd caught a glimpse of, then they had to be a tough, enduring, and powerful species.

The starfield wheeled about as he brought his fighter into a roll, the rest of his squad forming up behind him. Ahead lay countless enemies, and more kills than he could ever hope for. He grinned as they streaked towards a cluster of Reaper Occuli harassing one of the Quarian Liveships. This will be fun.

oOo

Commander Stevens walked briskly from the turbolift at the rear of his ship's gaping hangar bay, head across the debris-strewn, but still highly polished floor. All around him technicians, officers, and even the surviving TIE pilots, still clad in their black flight suits and helmets, worked to clear rubble from the smooth decking and put out the small fires that sputtered intermittently around the massive room. Commander Stevens glanced up, and cringed at the massive, ragged hole torn through the metal ceiling overhead, flanked on either side by the TIE fighter launch racks, which held only a few fighters out of their original two dozen. Looking past the torn, blackened metal that ringed the hole, he could see every deck that had been breached by the shot.

Shuddering at how close they'd come to total destruction, and trying to avoid looking at the bloodstained piles of white-armored stormtroopers and the grey-uniformed officers, Stevens walked up to the Deck Chief, a balding, pale, grey-eyed man by the name of Adams. Seeing his approach, the noncommissioned officer snapped to attention, saluted and shouted, his voice echoing off of the cavernous room's walls.

"Attention, Commander on Deck!" The other individuals not currently involved in any vital work stopped and saluted as well.

"At ease everyone, and carry on." Stevens said, saluting them back. "From now on I'm designating this entire system as a combat zone, so no saluting."

"Yessir!" The Chief responded as the other Imperials got back to work.

"How bad is it Chief?" Stevens asked in a low voice, walking up next to the man.

"_Bad_, sir." He replied with a dark look. "She's been gutted, we're still finding all the bodies, or, what's left of them." He finished with a grimace. "Repairs to the damaged levels are proceeding slowly, and medical called us a few minutes ago; they want to set up a triage station here because the med-bay's getting flooded with

casualties."

Suddenly a muted alarm began blaring and a voice came in over the intercom. "Attention, clear the deck, incoming transport ships!"

Stevens and Adams jogged quickly out of the main landing zones and watched as five huge dropships hovered up through the blue-tinged magnetic lock that held the atmosphere in from flying out of the massive, gaping rectangular hole on the underside of the ship that served as the access for the _Intolerant'_s hangar bay.

The dropships were massive, blocky constructs made of pitted and dull grey metal covered with painted-on blue accents. They had bulky, oversized bellies that made up the main bodies of the ships. Above the cargo bay was a relatively tiny, smoothly curved cockpit, surrounded by forward-reaching sensor probes. Two downward-swept, arching wings flanked the cargo bay, each one emblazoned with a massive white cross. Two thin tubes extended back from the dropships' main bodies, tipped with blue-painted tails. And flanking the tail assembly were two mammoth engines, set on vertical swivel-mounts.

Their engines roaring and spitting white flame, the five Medivacs slowly edged their way forward into the hangar bay in a block-like formation, their engines rotating aft to provide forward thrust. With a mechanical whir, four large leg-like sets of landing gear sprouted from the sides of the ships' bays, and touched down with a heavy-sounding _thud_ -which made the chief wince- on the polished black floor. With a high-pitched whine, the engines wound down, the exhaust fading, and all was silent as the Imperials stared at the new arrivals now taking up most of their hangar deck. Steam issued from the vehicles' landing gear, as well as dripping black oil.

Then, with the hiss of equalizing atmosphere, the front of the Medivacs' cargo bays cracked open along a line surrounded by black-and-yellow hazard stripes, and lowered on hydraulics to hit the ground with another jarring crash.

The chief gave an irritated huff at the dropships' clumsy arrival and apparent disrespect for his hangar deck, but stopped when he saw the figures that carefully stepped off of the ramp, their metallic boots clanking loudly in the silence that their arrival had caused.

Stevens' eyes widened. He'd thought that Raynor had just been unusually tall and well built for a human, now he realized that his entire group or maybe the whole sub-species of humanity must be the same way. The first person to step off the ship was clad entirely from head-to-foot in bulbous blue-and-black armor. It had huge, over-sized shoulder-guards and an incredibly bulky chest piece. In between solid armor plates, Stevens could see extensive servos and motors that hummed quietly, presumably to support the no-doubt insane weight of the powered armor.

The right shoulder had a crudely-painted group of symbols that Stevens didn't recognize, perhaps a name or serial number, and the left shoulder was emblazoned with a topless, beautiful human woman squatting in front of a black, stylized heart background, and clad in sheer red lingerie. A small, almost ridiculously small helmet sat

atop the armored figure, with a reflective orange blast-shield covering the human's face. An equally massive, blocky-looking gun was slung across his back.

Behind him was a group of similarly armored individuals, although their armor was white with blue trim, and they carried no weapons that Stevens could see. Instead, they held massive, unwieldy shields strapped their left arms, and their right forearms were covered with some sort of intricate, computerized device with glowing green syringes among other, stranger implements. A third form of armor, this one far more blocky than the others, with arms tipped in drills, assorted tools, and claw-like manipulators, hovered off of some of the other ships, partially supported by orange jets of fire erupting from small thrusters on their backs.

The first figure turned towards where the commander and the chief stood, stunned by the newcomers' appearances, and walked slowly towards them, his heavy footsteps echoing loudly off of the metal decking. His companions just stood milling around, waiting for orders apparently.

"Commander Stevens?" The marine asked in a thick drawl.

"Yes." The commander said uncertainly.

The marine snapped to attention and saluted smartly, shockingly similar to the Imperial salute, Stevens noticed, the tips of his fingers barely brushing the edge of his helmet. "Sergeant Jenkins of Raynor's Raiders reporting to provide assistance, sir!"

The commander returned the salute, and the marine's orange blast shield cracked open with a hiss and retracted upwards to reveal a square-jawed, hard-eyed man's face. A holographic display projects some sort of information inward onto his cheek.

"We thank you for your assistance, sergeant." Stevens said honestly. "Whatever you can provide will be of great help to us."

"Yes sir, we have medics and SCV's â€"Space Construction Vehicles," He elaborated at seeing the Imperials' blank looks and gesturing to the assembled troops behind him. "Where do you need us?"

"Chief?" Stevens asked looking at the deck chief.

"Right," The bald man said. "Are those â€"SCV's did you call them-Space-worthy?"

"Yes sir, the SCV is fully rated for vacuum, as are all of our suits." The Terran replied.

"Very well then, we need-" The Chief began outlining the needed repairs and instructing him on where the medics should travel, handing the marine a datapad containing a map of the Star Destroyer, which looked ridiculously small in the man's gauntleted hands.

Sergeant Jenkins nodded and began issuing orders over his helmet com. Most of the SCV's turned and flew out of the hangar bay, heading to the forward hull to help clear the wreckage and make repairs to the ship's devastated bow, with a few of them being relegated to help

repair the ventral hull breaches. The medics likewise split up, some of the men and women heading off to assist the beleaguered medical staff, the others remaining behind to deal with the incoming casualties from the _Destiny Ascension_.

As he watched the Terrans run around the hangar, heading off to do the duties that chief Adams had designated. The sergeant stayed behind and walked back over to the commander.

"We'll do all we can, sir." He told him as he stomped across the floor. "And might I say I'm impressed that your ship could take such a pounding and stay in one piece."

"Thank you, sergeant." Stevens replied, and then the comlink on his belt beeped for attention.

"Yes?" He asked, holding the small device up to his face.

"Sir, we need those dropships cleared from the hangar, there are shuttles waiting to land."

"Copy that." He clicked the communicator off and turned to the seven-foot tall armored man next to him.

"Sergeant, we need the hangar deck cleared, we've got incoming shuttles from the _Destiny Ascension_ that need to land." The commander told him.

"Yes sir." He turned to the dropships and waved one arm, signaling them to go. "Medivacs, takeoff and head for that ship, the _Destiny Ascension_, assist with the evacuations if possible."

"Yes sir, in transit." Came the crackling reply over his radio, and with a coughing roar, the dropships' massive engines came to life, and they lifted slowly off of the hangar deck, wheeled around clumsily in the enclosed space, and dove off through the entrance to the hangar.

Scarcely a minute later, the five _Lambda_-class shuttles glided smoothly into the room on their repulsorlifts, and set down gently on the floor. Stevens watched as the sergeant next to him took in the sight of the large shuttles, with their towering upper wings and the two lower wings folded up next to it. The marine looked slightly contemplative, but otherwise expressionless as they walked towards the landed ships. Meanwhile a group of the Terran Medics jogged over to stand nearby, ready to assist if needed.

The shuttles' landing ramps lowered with a hiss, and from them descended the survivors of the _Ascension_, some of them, surprisingly, being supported by stormtroopers, their normally pristine white armor stained by dark purple blood from the wounded aliens that some of them had arms around, supporting them.

The Terran marine sergeant whistled at the appearance of the Asari as they slowly descended from the shuttle. "Damn, I wish aliens looked like that from where I come from."

Privately, Stevens agreed with him, to an extent. Having seen plenty of near-human species in his own galaxy, the Asari weren't that different from anything he'd encountered before, although in his

experience they did look unique. They were blue-skinned, with human-looking faces and five-fingered hands. However they lacked ears and hair, and their heads tapered into a series of backswept, _fringes_ was the right word, the commander supposed. He certainly wasn't a xenophile, but he did have to admit that they possessed a certain sort of beauty.

The fact that they all appeared to be female probably helped. Their armor was all sculpted to reflect a feminine physique, and was a dark black with a red undersuit that seemed to be very form-fitting.

Stevens wondered at the fact that they were all female as the crew walked down the ramp slowly, sometimes on their own, in most cases supported by stormtroopers or medics, and in a couple of severe cases, on stretchers. _Were they like the Hapans? _He wondered idly, watching as the Terrans rushed over to the aliens and began conversing quietly with the Imperial medics. _Do they only allow their females to serve in positions of authority and the military?_

The last Asari slowly walked off of the shuttle, clutching her right hand to the left side of her chest and supported by a stormtrooper who held the woman's shoulders to steady her.

"Commander Stevens?" She asked, having set her omnitool to transmit her words in English. The grey-haired man standing in a crisp grey uniform nearby nodded.

"I am Matriarch Kiara, commander of the _Destiny Ascension." _She winced as she stepped off the ramp and jolted her injured ribs. "On behalf of my crew I'd like to thank you for saving us."

"It was our pleasure, ma'am." Stevens replied, before turning to the medic supporting her. "How badly is she hurt?"

"A couple of cracked ribs from where a support beam fell on her, sir." The man replied, his voice slightly distorted by his black-and-white helmet. "I gave her a shot of Bacta and wrapped her chest. She refused painkillers though, insisted they go to the others."

Kiara's eyes had narrowed when the commander had addressed the medic, but she had kept silent. "I'm fine commander," She said, shaking the trooper's hands off. "I've had worse injuries."

"Very well." The Imperial said, nodding to the medic, who ran off to attend to the other injured. "I apologize, Matriarch, but I'm unsure of what your rank is in comparison to our rank structure."

"Of course." She replied, straightening slightly. "I believe it translates to... admiral?"

His training took over; commander Stevens, and the Terran standing behind him instantly snapped to attention and saluted smartly. Moving in an eerie sort of unison.

"Welcome aboard, ma'am." The commander stated, his voice suddenly stiff and professional. "I apologize for not having a proper welcome..." He stopped when she shakily returned the salute.

"It's fine, I honestly didn't expect one." She sighed and sagged, clutching her side.

"Ma'am, are you sure you don't want any painkillers?" Stevens asked her.

"No, my crew needs them more." She replied, before her eyes lit on the Terran marine standing silently behind the Imperial. Her eyes widened at the sight of the heavily armored human, towering taller than a Geth Prime. "Goddess." She whispered.

Stevens followed her gaze and recognized her confusion. "Ma'am, if I may, we should head to the bridge, and there is much to discuss." He gestured towards the rear of the hangar.

"Of course." She replied and they began walking toward the lift.

"I'll stay behind and coordinate with chief Adams and my people, sir." The Terran sergeant said.

"Of course, sergeant." Stevens ordered, and the man jogged away to meet with the chief, who was staring up at the hole at the top of the hangar, talking into a comlink, in one hand and holding a datapad in the other.

The two officers, one human, one Asari, passed by cluster of medics, each attending to one of the fallen crew of the Ascension, watching as the Imperials and the Terrans worked uneasily around one another, the Raiders' bulky armor sometimes getting in the way of things. Why would they want to bring that armor into a starship? He wondered as they drew level with the medical staff. Then a set of doors next to the turbolift irised open and two grey-uniformed Imperials rushed in, bearing a stretcher between them.

Stevens inhaled sharply at the sight and heard the admiral gasp. The wounded man's uniform had been burned to a crisp, and in some places it had melted onto his skin. All of his hair had been burned off, and angry red and black blisters the size of quarters covered every inch of his exposed skin. What was worse were his eyes, or rather, the gaping, black eye sockets where his eyes used to be. His mouth was stretched open and the young man was screaming at the top of his lungs, his teeth were completely exposed as his lips had been burned off.

Before he could blink, two of the Terran Medics descended upon the tortured man where the two technicians set him down, and began passing their free forearms over him, holographic diagnostics popping up in their helmets. They glanced at each other through their blue-green tinted blast shields and nodded. Thin green streams of light erupted from their right forearms and passed over his body, and as they did, something strange happened; the angry red blisters began to reduce in size and fade away, making way for the new, undamaged skin that began to grow in its place, rapidly healing the man's devastated skin, although his uniform remained fused to his skin and would require surgery to remove. However, at the moment the Medics were concerned with stabilizing him, not doing anything too complex. Unfortunately, though, their technology had its limits, as his eyes weren't restored, but his eyelids over the empty sockets were

re-grown. Then with a sigh, the man slumped back on the stretcher, partially healed and comfortably unconscious. The two Terrans immediately went off to help other wounded individuals.

Stevens blinked, twice. What would have taken days or weeks in a bacta tank had been accomplished in a couple of minutes. _How in the Force did they do that? _What _was that?_ Then a truly horrifying thought hit him. _If their combat medics are capable of this sort of rapid healing, there must be a good reason for it. _He shuddered, suddenly realizing the implications of their massive body armor and huge warships. _The only reason their military tech would be this advanced is if it absolutely _had _to be. What kind of Universe do they come from if they have to outfit their soldiers this heavily?_

Shuddering again, he led the Asari to the turbolift and punched the button for the bridge. As the elevator started to ascend, he turned to the alien in the enclosed space with him. She was staring at him curiously.

The Matriarch's mind was abuzz with questions. _Who are these people? _She wondered. _They aren't Cerberus, _that's _for certain, but how could they build a ship of this size? It doesn't match the standard human design, and this whole ship is massive and _wasteful_ with its space! And those armored humans, and their medical tech, that's light-years beyond anything we have! And the weaponry on this ship..._

"I imagine you must have quite a few questions for me." The commander said after a moment.

"Yes," The Asari said, staring at him with a little suspicion. "Well, just one to start with: who are you people? Are you part of some sort of secret human organization? And if so, why haven't you shared your advances with the rest of us! We're at war!"

The commander sighed and ran his fingers through his greying hair. "Well, I'll answer you truthfully, but understand that this will be hard to accept." He looked her in the eye. "My ship and I came from an alternate Universe. Our Emperor ordered us to travel here to assist your Universe in fighting the Reapers."

The Asari blinked. "What?" She said flatly. _That has to be the _stupidest _thing I've ever heard! _She thought. _That doesn't-_

"I understand how stupid this must sound." Stevens said, seemingly reading her thoughts. "But it's true! Our Emperor is a powerful Force-user." At seeing her blank look he re-phrased that. "A, uh, powerful psychic. He had a vision that there would be dire consequences for our Universe if we didn't come to yours to help."

_Oh, sure, and that doesn't sound insane. _A part of his mind commented sarcastically. However, now that he thought of it, this whole undertaking seemed insane, and then, an even more horrifying thought hit him; how the hell were they supposed to go home once they were done?! The Emperor's briefing hadn't talked about that, and although the invasion had seemed like a perfectly logical thing to do back home, here in this Universe, far out of reach of the will of the Emperor, forced upon every Imperial through the Force, this whole

expedition seemed like a huge mistake.

oOo

Meanwhile, a Universe away, deep within the heart of the Imperial Palace on Coruscant, the Emperor cackled madly at his own genius, and rubbed his hands together. _Soon,_ He thought gleefully. _Soon my troops will re-conquer the Mass Effect Universe and change those endings. And in their gratitude, my own Universe will gain more fans! We will become stronger! Those fools don't realize that we are all just pawns in a larger game! Well, with this act, I'll take my first step towards manipulating the manipulators, and then..._ He laughed again, his ancient voice cracking slightly. _Soon I shall rule not just this Universe, but all Universes!_

"HehehHAHAHA!" He laughed madly, before a stray thought interrupted his glorious vision.

Hmm, I wonder if I remembered to tell them how to come back home? He wondered, realizing that he'd invested a fairly good chunk of his forces in this undertaking, including the first _Executor-_Class Star Dreadnaught, his apprentice, his best grand admiral (even if he was an inhuman _thing_), the Empire's top ace pilot, and one of his most talented Hands. He shook his head. _I've invested far too much in this venture to see it fail!_ He rubbed his hands together, noticing how cold they felt. His circulation wasn't what it once was, and he debated on whether or not to spring for a pair of gloves (black of course), or to just transfer himself to one of his cloned bodies. He put the matter off for later and turned to the plans for the second Death Star glowing on a terminal nearby.

Yes, much like this jaunt into another Universe there was no way that this could fail either, the undertaking was just too big for the puny Rebels to stop.

oOo

Back in the turbolift aboard the _Intolerant_, Matriarch Kiara was eyeing Stevens as if he was out of his mind. _Seriously? A psychic Emperor had a vision and sent them here? You'd think he could come up with a better story than that!_ It was almost crazy enough to believe, seeing as there was no way anyone would take it seriously as a cover story.

"But unfortunately, we've lost all contact with the rest of our forces." He mused, looking downcast even as he realized that he might be stranded here. "I don't think they survived the jump, it might just be us here."

How convenient. The Asari thought, idly wondering what was taking the elevator so damn long. _This is worse than the Citadel!_

"But regardless," Stevens continued, marshaling his strength. "We're here to help, and we_ will help_, and- and you don't believe a word I'm saying, do you ma'am?"

"Would _you?_" She asked.

"Now that you mention it," He thought hard for a second, and realizing how absurd this must sound to an outsider. "No, ma'am. I

wish there was a way to prove it, but--"

"There is." The Asari replied, tugging her red gloves off, tucking them into a small pouch on her belt and holding out her bare blue hands to him.

He looked at her uncertainly. "What are--"

"An ability of my race," The Matriarch explained. "Is that we can link our nervous systems to those of other species by touch, allowing us to share information with one another. It allows us to learn to communicate with new species easily and to share complex ideas quickly. If you want, I can use it to verify your story. I'll be able to tell if memories are real or imaginary."

Stevens' eyes narrowed. "With all due respect, ma'am, there are some highly classified secrets locked away in my head. It's intel that I'm not allowed to share with anyone. I don't like the idea of you being able to find all of that out, even if this isn't my Universe." Or of the idea of her being in his head, _period._

She nodded. "Of course. Since the linking of nervous systems is mutual, you can keep me away from anything that you don't want known." She paused. "Although, if you'd rather not..."

"No." He sighed, frustrated. "I'd rather we trust one another if we're going to work together, ma'am. And trying to explain everything and convince you will take time we don't have. Let's just do this." He paused for a second. "This won't, well, lobotomize me or anything?"

"No, commander, it's... hard to describe, and it'll likely be... different." She said slowly. "But you'll be fine."

Still apprehensive, but feeling compelled to go through with this in order to continue his mission, he gingerly placed his hands in her surprisingly warm ones and looked up at her.

"Just relax, commander." She said, looking up and closing her eyes. "Open your mind, and _embrace eternity!_"

As she spoke those last words her eyes flew open and, panicking, Stevens saw that her eyes had turned jet black. He started to pull away, but then he suddenly lost all contact with his senses as a rush of images flashed through his brain. But above all, he felt a feeling of closeness, of _oneness _with her, as if her mind and soul were brushing up against his, it was intoxicating and exhilarating, and as warmth flooded his mind, he barely noticed as the images, memories, began flowing past his vision.

...Seeing Coruscant, surrounded by the Golan-III defensive platforms for the first time through the dirty glass of a bulk transport. The city-planet's space was crowded by thousands of starships slowly heading to and from the planet in tightly-packed space lanes patrolled by Victory-II Class Star Destroyers...

_...The graduation day parade after he'd finished his five years at the Academy. Overhead the Academy's pilot graduates flew TIE fighters in tight, V-shaped formations, and even further above, the Star Destroyer _Adjucator_ hovered, massive, menacing, a testament to the

Empire's enduring power..._

_...Standing on the bridge of the _Intolerant_ watching as a frigate, emblazoned with the red, stylized falcon emblem of the Rebellion, evaporated under concentrated fire of the turbolasers in the depths of space. Off to the left side of his vision, the interdictor cruiser _Restrictor_ began moving away, the Star Destroyer covered in bulging gravity well generators had done its job by catching the Rebels..._

...Watching a COMPNOR rally down one of the main streets of Coruscant while on leave. He sipped his caf while watching from a nearby balcony, slightly disgusted, as the young man in a grey tunic shouted into a mic about the superiority of humans and how all other aliens were inferior and deserved nothing but scorn from their human masters. Each statement was punctuated by cheering from the massive crowd of youth that clogged the avenue along one of the flat sections of Coruscant...

_...Sitting alone in his cramped quarters aboard the _Intolerant_, staring at the datapad in his hands. The screen displayed the offer of another promotion, with a veiled threat at the end of the letter that if he didn't take this promotion, then he'd be kicked out of the Navy. He sighed, he didn't want to give up his post; he'd grown fond of his Victory-II Star Destroyer and didn't want to participate in the terror raids its bigger sibling ships took part in, but he didn't want to be thrown out of the Navy either. His entire life revolved around serving in the military, protecting the civilians that couldn't defend themselves..._

...He'd made a choice; no matter if he got thrown out, he could not in good conscience take a post as captain of an Imperial-II Class Star Destroyer knowing full well what kinds of atrocities he could be ordered to commit. Pacing around his tiny cabin, he made the decision to begin tendering his rejection of the promotion. Where he went from there, he'd just have to wait and see...

...His ship had been ordered to join up with Darth Vader's task force for a covert operation. He'd never met the feared Sith Lord before, but he'd heard rumors, stories of his so-called Force abilities. The orders also very clearly stated that after this mission he'd be given a mandatory, honorable discharge from naval service. He sighed, knowing that this would happen, and wondered if he should begin working on a resumé...

_...He was sitting in a stark grey briefing room, surrounded on all sides by captains and other high-ranking officers. He was very nervous, as no one knew what their mission was. A door at the other end of the room opened, and a blue-skinned, near-human alien walked in, his glowing red eyes sweeping the room. Instantly the entire room jumped to attention, not because of the alien's appearance, but because of the immaculate white and gold uniform he was wearing. A _Grand Admiral? _An _alien _Grand Admiral? The Chiss stepped out of the way of the door and several tall guards clad in red robes and armor, and holding long pikes filed in, taking positions around the room. Realizing what was coming, the entire room "save for the guards- sank into a deep, one-kneel bow as through the door walked two figures that seemed to be swathed in darkness._

_One was tall, completely sealed inside of an advanced life-support

suit with a billowing silk cape, and wearing a nightmarish respirator mask that let out a regular, ominous breathing noise. The tall Sith Lord's mask's reflective eyes surveyed the room as his short, hunched companion walked into the room. His teeth cracked and rotting, his flesh pallid and sagging from the Dark Side of the Force that flowed through him, and his burning yellow eyes glinting with malice, Emperor Palpatine struck fear into everyone's hearts by his mere presence, despite being clad in simple black robes and leaning heavily on a wooden cane. Together, the two seemed to suck the light out of the entire area, leaving the front of the briefing room swathed in shadows._

"_Rise." The Emperor's voice sounded, weak and raspy, but possessed of an undercurrent of hard malice and hatred that belied its delivery._

The officers rose from their bows and took their seats. The Emperor â€"this must have been important for him to brief them all personally- began speaking of a parallel Universe, where humanity's homeworld, Earth, was being threatened. He knew very little, only that the forces from that Universe were woefully unprepared for the threats facing them, and that the Empire would send forces there to assist them, under the command of Grand Admiral Thrawn, to help ensure humanity's dominance in that galaxy. When asked why they should even send forces to the other Universe, the Emperor replied cryptically that this victory would be 'vital to the survival of the Empire, I have foreseen it!' And after that everyone felt compelled to stop questioning him. They were each told that individual briefing packets and orders would be available on their private terminals in their cabins aboard their ships, and they were dismissed...

_...Having analyzed the packet thoroughly, Stevens was now standing on the bridge of his ship, one of dozens that now hovered in formation in orbit around the Maw. His ship was utterly dwarfed by the dark-hulled, monstrous _Executor,_ which hovered silently in the middle of the other vessels. Ten miles long and bristling with weapons, everything about the Super Star Destroyer resonated with the arrogance, pride, wealth, and power of the Empire. Then the order was given, and the ships oriented to face the black hole. Then with a flicker and the familiar sights of the stars elongating into a hyperspace tunnel, the fleet jumped..._

...Fighting the Reapers, watching as death approached him. Then, salvation came in the form of Raynor's Raiders as the massive Battlecruisers flew in past his ship, bristling with weapons, the corpse of the last Reaper they had killed floating away slowly...

And then, with a bright flash of light, the bond ended, leaving Stevens feeling oddly empty and confused.

He opened his eyes suddenly, not realizing that they were closed, and took a deep, shaking breath. _What- what was that? _He wondered, still feeling the warmth from when she'd touched her mind to his. _It was, that was amazing! _

Any further thoughts on the matter were driven from her mind as someone nearby cleared their throat loudly.

The two occupants of the elevator turned their heads as one, and the blood drained from commander Stevens' face as he realized that sometime during the meld "how long did that last?—they'd arrived on the bridge, and that everyone on the command deck was staring at them. He glanced down and, mortified, noticed that he was still holding the Matriarch's hands in his. He quickly released them and dropped his hands to his sides, palms sweating.

"Sir?" His XO inquired cautiously, staring at him.

Fighting down a blush, and wondering why it felt like he'd been caught out with a girl in a storage closet, commander Stevens barked an order. "Attention, ADMIRAL ON DECK!"

Instantly, every eye snapped back to their stations and the bridge officers sat forward in their chairs, staring rigidly at the displays. Lieutenant Lane came to the picture perfect position of attention and saluted. "Ma'am!" He stated loudly.

Letting her military training take over, Kiara saluted back, before ordering. "At ease."

"Give me a sitrep, Lieutenant." Stevens ordered briskly, trying to put the... ah, incident behind them as quickly as possible while walking to the front of the bridge, the Asari in tow.

"Yes sir." The younger man replied with one last questioning glance back at his CO. "Commander Raynor's forces engaged the Reapers, splitting their forces into two groups of capital ships and a large group of starfighters. I believe his plan was to use the starfighters to harass the bigger Reaper ships while one group laid down suppressing fire and the other got into firing position for heavier weapons."

He paused, as if bracing himself. "Sir, during the fighting some of their starfighters activated a cloaking system that rendered them completely invisible to all of our sensors."

Stevens frowned. "No, that shouldn't be possible. You can't mount a cloaking device on a ship that small."

"That's not the only thing, sir." He replied grimly. "The starfighters destroyed the rest of the Reaper fighters, while cloaked."

"...How?" Stevens asked. Cloaking technology wasn't uncommon in his Universe, however its major drawback was that when it was engaged, just as no one could see into the cloaking field, no one on the inside could see the outside and thus target anything accurately. How had these people managed to get around that?

"We don't know sir, however that advantage didn't last long, seeing as the bigger ships either found away to neutralize their cloaking or just see through it, and decimated the fighters. They began attacking the capital ships, and, well, that's when these things showed up."

He manipulated a control on a nearby console and a holographic representation of a massive fleet appeared. Matriarch Kiara stepped forward and studied the ships displayed in the flickering blue

hologram. They looked... delicate, like each one was some sort of incredibly ornate sculpture of metal and crystal, a work of art, and each one subtly unique. Then, with a flicker, all of them vanished, save for a single, massive vessel at the heart of the fleet that dwarfed all of the others. It was a huge, saucer-shaped ship, with a massive, transparent dome surrounded by golden hull plating. Inside the dome there seemed to be buildings scattered across the ship's superstructure.

"How big is that ship?" Stevens asked slowly.

"She's about fifteen miles across, sir." The XO replied. "And we don't much more about her, since our sensors are still being repaired, but we did manage to get one more reading."

"Goddess." Kiara murmured, distracted. _No ship ever built is that large, not even the Reaper warships are that big! The only thing that comes close is the Citadel. _How_ did they build that?_

Lane hit another control, and the replay continued. The Protoss warship just seemed to hover there for a second, and then a massive, concentrated wave of energy blasts exploded out of the nothingness where the rest of the fleet had vanished and flew off out of view.

"We got a reading from those weapons discharges sir." He said grimly. "We don't know what kind of energy it was, but the destructive power... It, it rivals the combined firepower of half of the sector fleets. The Reapers were completely vaporized."

Stevens allowed himself to whistle. _That _was impressive, and there couldn't be more than a couple hundred ships out there total. With a jolt, he remembered commander Raynor mentioned looking for some friends of his, and these seemed to be them. He shuddered again, realizing that these aliens must have come from the same Universe as the Terrans, and with firepower like that...

"Where is Raynor's fleet now?" He asked, breaking off his train of thought.

"They've established a defensive perimeter several hundred clicks away and are patrolling it with their allies." Lane replied. "The Reapers have retreated back a hundred clicks and are just sitting there watching. There's a lot of wreckage in between, but no life signs. They haven't tried to contact us yet, sir."

"Well I think it's time we call them then." The CO decided. "Lieutenant, you have the con. I'll be in the conference room. Comms, hail Raynor's flagship and pipe it through to the conference room, secure channel."

"Yes, sir!"

He turned to the Asari, who had stood by watching the discussion with interest. "Ma'am, if you'd care to join me?"

She nodded and they walked to the small circular room at the rear of the bridge, just off to the right of the turbolift. The two officers never noticed the Lieutenant staring hard at their retreating backs.

oOo

In the dim darkness of a storage room, there came a bright flash of light, momentarily illuminating dusty metal shelves and a few sagging cardboard boxes. When the light faded, there was a tall, powerfully built man standing among the shelves. Clad in a torn, blood-and-mud-stained sweater and jeans, Jack Ryan surveyed the room slowly, squinting in the dim light. _This is worse than Rapture. _He thought, inspiration striking him.

He held out his left hand and concentrated for a brief instant. With a muted roar, blue-tinged yellow flames erupted between his fingertips, the veins in his wrist and lower arms bulged to the surface and glowed a deep, burning red, and his flesh seemed to scab and crisp over, forming a hard brown layer of heat-proof flesh, shot through with red and yellow. The air around him shimmered from the sudden warmth.

He snapped his fingers and a blue ball of flame roared from his outstretched hand and hit one of the stacked cardboard boxes, igniting it instantly and illuminating the room with a flickering orange light. He searched the room again and found an exit, consisting of a set of strange sliding doors. He walked over, relaxing his mental control and allowed the incineration plasmid to return to inactivity once again. His hands returned to normal.

He couldn't see any sort of door handles on the strange entrance, but that wasn't going to stop him. He grabbed the only visible edges of the door and _pushed _them apart. The mechanisms keeping them locked in place were strong, but no match for the man's plasmid-boosted strength. With a squeal, the doors separated, opening into a dim shopping center of some sort; shelves and racks of foodstuffs covered one half of the room, and another wall was covered in counters.

The silent man reached into his backpack and drew his heavily-modified machine gun, loaded with armor-piercing ammo, and held it at the ready. The back of the weapon was covered in a strange, glowing, orange and yellow device, and the magazine receiver had a small arch that helped to hold the magazine in place. Somehow this increased the power and penetration of the bullets, how, he didn't know. There was also a small canister affixed to the left side of the gun that was connected to a larger cylinder attached to the gun's muzzle, which decreased the weapon's recoil.

Jack walked quickly through the store, pausing to grab a few bags of anything that appeared edible. He tried to loot the cash registers, but found there was no physical money anywhere to be found. _Strange._ He thought, before continuing.

The front of the store once consisted of large windows, however these had been shattered long ago, leaving only broken shards of glass that _crunched _under his feet as he hopped out of the store and into the street. The sky was dark, shot through with lightning and a strange blue-white glow coming from behind him. The city around him looked like a burned-out hulk; ruined and crumbling buildings stretched on for as far as the eye could see. Deserted, bullet-ridden cars clogged the street, as well as rubble from destroyed buildings.

Hefting his machine gun, Ryan slowly panned it across the buildings

across the street. There wasn't any sign of movement, but he still concentrated again, and his form shimmered and faded from view, his natural camouflage tonic creating a small invisibility field around him. He panned his weapon around, and stood still for a moment, listening. Far off there was the crackling of gunfire, muted explosions, and other sounds of warfare, but nothing too close.

Jack turned right and started down the street, the invisibility melting off of him as he jogged along the sidewalk, looking down every alley. _Well, I'm here._ He thought as he came to a four-way intersection and crouched behind a car that had crashed into the side of a building. _Now all I have to do is find these 'Reaper' things._

He edged up to the concrete foundation of the building on his side of the street, and peered around the corner. It was another empty street, stretching off into the gloom, with a few abandoned cars littering the road. However, stretching up towards the sky above the buildings lining the right side of the street was a brilliant silver thread that pierced the clouds, pulsing with energy.

That's where I need to go. He thought, and edged around the corner, and running swiftly down the street.

His first warning was a high-pitched hum that seemed to echo off of the shattered buildings. When he first heard it, Jack dove down a side alley and hid in the darkness, clutching his gun closely and allowing his active camo to re-engage. Soon a boxy, white-bodied craft, with four prongs extending off of the front and the back of the shuttle, and fire erupting from four thrusters on the bottom, flew overhead. The angular shuttle banked and set down a hundred feet down the street from where Jack was taking cover in the alley. As the craft's flat belly touched the ground, a side panel adorned with a strange, geometric, black and gold symbol split open, and a small squad of men filed out, eight in total.

All of them were clad in bulky, gold and white armor, with shoulder pauldrons that were adorned with the same logo as their ship. Most of the soldiers carried small handguns of similar coloration to their armor, and had helmets that were dark, angular, and menacing-looking, with small slits on them that glowed red. However one of them, standing behind the others, had bulkier armor with a heavy backpack and some sort of canisters mounted on his chest, and a different sort of helmet, with a gold patch on the top. He clutched a large assault rifle and seemed to be the one giving the orders.

"Squad, search the nearby buildings! Intel suggests there may be civilians inside hiding undesirables."

"Yes sir!" One of the other troops replied, and they methodically broke into a nearby building and filed in, the stomping of their boots fading away inside.

Jack frowned at their voices; they were raspy and deep. Some sort of distortion from the helmets maybe? They also seemed... mechanical in their execution and speech.

As he watched, the shuttle lifted off and the leader put two fingers up to the side of his helmet, pacing around slightly in the center of the street.

"Command, fireteam theta is on the ground and beginning our sweep." He spoke aloud to no one. Jack realized he must have some sort of radio in his suit. _That's odd._ He thought. _Mine's the size of a large book..._

Reminded of his radio, Jack began debating on whether or not to pull out his radio and see if he could pick up any transmissions, when suddenly a shout came from the building the other soldiers had entered and three forms were flung out into the street, followed by the soldiers who had entered the building. The first two were a young man and woman, dark-haired and clad in fraying clothing, however, the third...

Jack had never seen anything like it, not even among the mutated splicers of Rapture. It was female, at least if the dark grey and blue armor it wore was any indication, and it almost appeared human. However, the... thing had blue skin and no hair or ears whatsoever, instead possessing what looked like short tentacles, that sprouted out of its skull and stretched out a little ways behind its head, where they came together in a sort of point.

"Consorting with aliens and harboring a xeno." The leader said to the two cowering humans on the ground, interrupting Jack's observations. "You've betrayed humanity by associating with _this_, and there's only one punishment for traitors."

"No... No, please no!" The woman sobbed uncontrollably, groveling on the ground, but the other human took a more aggressive approach as he got up on his knees.

"Burn in hell, you _fucking_ Cerberus _bastards_!" He screamed at the assembled soldiers. Then he spat on the leader's boots.

The Centurion smoothly and methodically brought his assault rifle up and fired once into the man's head, causing his head to explode in a shower of blood, brains, and bone. As the body collapsed, hands and legs twitching, the Cerberus trooper turned and put a bullet through the woman's head as well.

_They're shooting _civilians!_ Jack realized, and before he even had time to think, he was acting.

Jack leaned around the corner, becoming visible as he brought his gun up. The Centurion was just turning to the still-alive alien on the ground, she was on her hands and knees and shaking. The edges of his vision seemed a little blurry as he sighted in on the nearest armored soldier, his finger forced the trigger back...

The machine gun roared, fire sprouting from its barrel, as a stream of armor-piercing bullets perforated the nearest Assault Trooper. The man staggered back as the older, but still effective rounds punched through the weak points in his armor, tearing gaping holes in his body and blowing out of the other side of him in a shower of blood, staining the pristine white armor of his shocked comrades. As the first enemy crumpled to the ground, Jack strafed the rest of the group with gunfire, killing a few more of the Cerberus troops and wounding the others.

"Hostiles!" The Centurion screamed, firing his assault rifle at the

figure shooting at them from a nearby alley.

His men charged, brining up their SMG's and returning fire as well, the hypervelocity rounds ripped through the air near him. Jack ducked back into the alley as the shots impacted the concrete wall, blasting huge craters out of them and scattering dust and shards of rock. His back against the building wall, he shifted his machine gun to a left-handed grip and held it out around the corner, firing blindly up the street. More shots impacted the wall next to his outstretched hands, the flying gravel cutting his skin. He quickly pulled his gun back as additional rounds streaked past the alley entrance.

Jack quickly crouched down and peered out around the corner, lower than head-level. The soldiers, now numbering only five counting the leader, were slowly advancing up the street about fifty feet away and getting closer. Then the Centurion grabbed one of the cylinders off of his chest and tossed it towards him. Jack ducked back into cover and braced for an explosion, only to be surprised when all he heard was a muted hiss.

He looked back again, and saw a huge swath of gray smoke billowing out and obscuring the entire street from view. He pressed his back up against the wall. _Now I can't see them coming. _Then his eyes lit on a car lying abandoned just a little up the street from him, visible through the mouth of the alley. _And they won't see _this_ coming._

Stretching out his left hand, Jack concentrated, his breath coming in short gasps as sweat beaded his brow above narrowed eyes. Slowly, with a series of groans and squeaks, the car rose up off of the ground and hovered in mid-air. All of his concentration was focused on maintaining the telekinesis plasmid as he levitated something larger than anything he'd lifted before.

"Raagghh!" He bellowed and made a tossing motion over his right shoulder. The car, seemingly unsupported, flew off down the street, following the motion of his hand.

It tumbled through the air and hit the street just short of the smokescreen with a crash, its glass windows shattering and the metal crumpling. Then it _bounced, _leaving a huge indent in the pavement, and flew off into the smoke.

"What the-?!" One of the soldiers shouted in alarm.

"Look out!" Came another voice.

There was a muted _crunch _of buckling metal, and a sliding noise, and then silence. Jack leaned up against the wall, breathing heavily. That was the largest thing he'd ever tried to use telekinesis on and it took a lot out of him. His active camo returned, blending him into the wall.

Suddenly, the Centurion rounded the corner, assault rifle at the ready, and fired a burst of bright white rounds down the alley, the roaring of the gun almost deafening Jack, who was leaning up against the wall a few inches from him.

"What the-" The Centurion muttered, lowering his gun slightly as he realized that the alley was empty.

Jack sprang into action.

He was too close to bring his own gun up in time, or to drop it and go for the pistol on his belt, so he merely lunged forward, sweeping his left arm out to knock the Cerberus trooper's gun out of his hands and stagger him. The man suddenly lunging at him out of nowhere from mere inches away startled the Centurion, but the Reaper implants throughout his body had granted him superhuman reflexes. As Jack swept the Harrier aside, the white-armored figure managed to keep ahold of it in his right hand, and swung his other arm down towards the gun held in Jack's hands and kicked the man in the chest.

Jack staggered back with a grunt, the machine gun ripped from his hands by the force and his chest smarting from the kick. Without his gene tonics the blow would've caved in his rib cage. He looked up just in time to see the Centurion leveling his rifle. With a power born of desperation, he stuck both of his clawed hands out, quickly making fists and jerking them back towards him. A firm lance of psychic energy grabbed hold of the trooper's gun and yanked it from his grip, sending it tumbling over Jack's shoulder.

The Cerberus soldier drew a long, baton-like object from a recessed holster on his chest piece, flicked it open, the tip sparking with electricity, and charged him with a bellow. Jack crouched, and as the soldier drew in close, he quickly slid to the side and ducked under the other man's arm as he swung. He grabbed the man's wrist with his right hand and whirled around, bringing his left elbow down hard on the Centurion's outstretched arm.

"AHH!" The soldier's mechanical voice howled, accompanying a loud crunching sound as Jack's reinforced bones and muscles staved in the thin armor covering his right arm and shattered the Centurion's elbow. Dropping the baton, the Centurion twisted and slugged Jack across the jaw with a vicious left cross, sending him reeling to the ground at the mouth of the alley. The soldier ran at him, his right arm hanging useless.

Jack got to his feet, blood pouring from a split lip, and barely caught the Centurion's left fist in one hand. Just as the Centurion kicked out and tried to hit his groin, the larger man brought his free hand up in an uppercut, knocking the Centurion's helmet clean off. Then the soldier's foot connected, and Jack's world went white with pain. He crumpled to the ground even as the Centurion retreated, his hand covering his face.

Jack quickly recovered, his genetically-augmented body rapidly healing, and got to his feet unsteadily, staring at the Centurion, recoiling slightly as his left hand dropped away from his face. The soldier's eyes had either been replaced or heavily augmented, as they were glowing blue, with thin glowing strips of... something sprouting vertically from each eye just below the surface. His skin appeared to be heavily bruised and almost dead-looking, and there were odd lumps in certain parts of his face that suggested that other things had been surgically implanted into him. It wasn't much compared to the tumor-covered and malformed denizens of Rapture, but it was still disturbing.

The Centurion howled, an unnerving noise, and drew a wicked-looking combat knife from a boot holster and charged again. Breathing

heavily, Jack tensed and, ducking under the man's clumsy swing, brought both hands up and caught the Centurion's throat. He furrowed his brow and focused, as glowing blue veins suddenly flared to life along both arms. Jack's own eyes began glowing bright blue, and as he snarled noiselessly, flexing his fingers, he sent millions of volts of electricity into the Centurion's wide-eyed form.

The soldier spasmed, his knife flung away by his now uncontrolled hands. His skin crisped and smoked, and small arcs of electricity coated his form, until with a disturbing popping noise, the Reaper implants in his eyes and face exploded from the overload, showering Jack with gore.

Jack cut off the voltage, ending the spasms. He threw the dead cyborg away and collapsed against a wall, gasping for breath. The glowing veins on his arms dimmed and vanished, and he wiped the sweat and blood off of his face with one stained sweater sleeve.

After he'd caught his breath, he reached for the pack, which he'd slipped from his shoulders sometime before he started shooting, found a medical hypo, and injected it into his thigh, stabbing the needle through his pants to do so. As the unstable stem cells raced through his system, repairing any damage they found, he grabbed a glowing blue EVE hypo and plunged it into his wrist above the chain link tattoos, sighing as he felt a rush of energy from the powerful fluid.

It's easy to see how this could become addicting. He realized slowly, his eyes half-closed. He quickly threw away the empty syringes, shouldered his backpack, and retrieved his gun from where it lay on the sidewalk. He checked it to make sure it was still in working order and cautiously peered around the corner again.

The smoke was dispersing, and no one was moving in the mist. The car he'd thrown lay ten feet away, crumpled and coated with blood and gore. He slowly walked down the street, machine gun ready to go. He noticed a thin trail of blood leading away from the car and around a heap of rubble. He rounded the debris and found an Assault Trooper, barely alive and with both of his legs pulverized, leaning up against the rubble, panting.

In a single smooth motion, he drew and cocked his revolver with his left hand and shot the Cerberus soldier through the head, blasting two huge holes through the ceramic helmet in the process and spraying the rocks with blood and brain.

Tucking the pistol back into his belt, Jack continued walking up the street. The two civilians were definitely dead, but the other, nonhuman one...

It- she, was lying in a slowly growing pool of dark purple blood, struggling feebly. Both of her hands were pressed to one side of her neck, and thin streams of blood were leaking passed her fingers. Her eyes were clouding over and her breathing was shallow as Jack knelt down next to her, setting his machine gun aside.

He quietly debated on whether or not to render assistance. Atlas had asked him to kill the Reapers, not do anything else. However, looking at the bleeding, inhuman woman before him, he knew he couldn't just leave her to die. He quickly unslung his pack, digging around in it

for a medkit. He tore open the first one he came across. It was pretty simple, some ADAM-enhanced bandages and a medical hypo, the latter of which he grabbed.

Turning to the dying Asari, he reached out with his left hand and gently pried her hands away from her neck. Her glazed eyes flickered to the hypo in his other hand and she seemed to relax, either from relief or blood loss.

He quickly assessed the wound. It looked like she'd been shot through the neck on one side, likely tearing a vital artery if her anatomy was at all similar to humans', which meant she probably had minutes or seconds left before she bled to death. With no further ado, he pulled the plastic covering on the needle off with his teeth, spitting it away, and injected the viscous red fluid directly into the wound. For a brief instant, Jack wondered if this would work; the med hypo worked off of unstable stem cells, and if her DNA was too different, then this would either not work or cause an uncontrollable mutation.

The red goo covering raw, torn flesh on her neck began to sizzle and bubble violently, emitting a hissing sound. Jack backed up; he had never seen that happen before. However, this quickly passed as her flesh absorbed the material and, before his eyes, fresh, undamaged blue skin grew back over her neck. In seconds he couldn't tell that she'd been wounded at all. Her eyes, which had drooped shut while he'd administered first aid, blinked open, clearer than before. She looked up at his face, confusion evident in her gaze, then her eyes darted to just over his left shoulder and widened.

Quicker than he could react, one of her hands darted to the waistband of his pants and snatched the revolver from where he'd tucked it in. She snapped off two shots, the bullets whizzing past his head-

-And blowing two holes in the chest of the Assault Trooper that had been sneaking up behind him, machine pistol raised. Jack turned in time to see the man drop, two large bloody holes punched through his armor, just as the woman he'd healed collapsed, her eyes rolling up in her head. Turning around and searching the streets, Jack couldn't see any other soldiers nearby, but the near brush with death had unnerved him. He reach down and grabbed the pistol from the Asari's limp grasp, and stuck it back in his waistband.

Jack scooped up his machine gun and brandished it one handed, grabbing the alien woman's armored collar with his free hand, eyes searching all around as he dragged the unconscious woman inside the nearest building; a large open-fronted store across the street from the building where the Cerberus troops had captured her.

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* * *

><p>Author's Notes:_ Longest, most action-packed, and darkest chapter ever!

Some things I'd like to point out: One, Harry is not some sort of magical god. Check my Bio if you want to understand how I feel about that. He's magically powerful, yes, but he isn't some force for destruction.

I finally, at many people's request, added the UNSC to the mix, and I decided to go a step further and included both the In Amber Clad from Halo 2, and the Pillar of Autumn from Halo: CE (both were taken from separate 'Haloverse's', much like the Covenant fighting in orbit around Jupiter were). This means that not only are both Jacob and his daughter Miranda alive, but Miranda still thinks her father is dead. How will they react when they meet next chapter? And what about when they meet the 'friendly' Covenant? Only time will tell. Also: yes, there are two Master Chiefs. I'm worried that the Earth can't handle the awesome.

Also, on the topic of Harry and the Twins getting guns, I know it's a bit of a reach to have them using futuristic assault rifles, but in combat the twins (which have received weapons training through the Department of Mysteries) are going to be doing the heavy lifting, with Harry sitting back and taking potshots.

In retrospect, the first scene aboard the Intolerant seemed to just drag on... I hope it wasn't too boring, but I wanted to set up a few plot points, add some depth to the two original characters that I've created, and emphasize how different the three or four forces that are working together well. If I did well, then please say so! If I didn't, well then if you can, please offer some advice on how to fix it.

Anyways, thanks for reading, and please leave a review! And as always; none of the content belongs to me; I'm just borrowing everyone else's toys and sandboxes to play with. Please don't take offense or sue me. And I'll see y'all in the next chapter:
Deadlocked

End
file.